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**CQSW, BA (Hons), MSc**

***THESIS TITLE:***

**Work-based learning routes in social work  
education: an exploration of student  
experiences**

***DOCTORATE OF PHILOSOPHY***

***EDUCATION***

**2015**

**The Open University**

## ABSTRACT

This thesis is based upon a study involving 20 work-based learners undertaking social work degrees at two UK universities, one local face-to-face university and one national distance learning university. The aim of this thesis is to offer insights into the experience of work-based learners as they journey from unqualified to qualified practitioner. The thesis is underpinned by a structural symbolic interactionist approach to human behaviour, in particular the work of Stryker on identity theory, where the importance attached to identity and role in 'identity change processes' (2008:21) is central to understanding the meanings attributed by work-based learners to their journeys into and through higher education.

In order to understand the meanings attributed by work based learners to their experience, narrative inquiry is used as the overarching methodological orientation; narratives of work-based learners' journeys into and through higher education were collected via focus groups (3) and semi structured interviews (35) and analysed using Braun and Clark's method of thematic analysis (2006). The data in this thesis highlight how identity impacts upon the educational journey of work-based learners making visible the challenges and opportunities that higher education presents to this group of students. The data also reveal how multiplicity of identity for work-based learners contributes to the complexity of both *becoming* and *being* a student. The dual concepts of salience and transition are applied to provide ways of understanding 'identity change processes' that occur as work-based

learners accommodate multiple roles and corresponding identities within educational, occupational and domestic domains.

In the rapidly changing landscape of social work education and a resurgence of work-based learning, this thesis provides an exploration of work-based learning provision within universities based on student experience. The implications of the findings from this study are considered for a range of stakeholders in social work education.

Dedicated to my Mother

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would first like to thank the participants in the research who gave so generously both of their time and of their life stories. I am most grateful to them and hope that as a result of this we will make a difference for others.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter one provides an introduction to key elements of this thesis and the broader context of the study. It begins in section 1.2 with an exploration of my personal and professional interest in work-based learning in social work education and therefore an understanding of my position in relation to this study. A discussion of the aims of the study follows in section 1.3 along with the final research questions upon which this thesis is based. The overarching theoretical perspective of structural symbolic interactionism and identity theory that underpin this thesis is introduced in section 1.4. Section 1.5 explores the current context of social work education providing the background for this study. The structure of the thesis outlined in section 1.6 with concluding comments provided in section 1.7.

### 1.2 MY INTEREST IN WORK-BASED LEARNERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

My interest in social work education and work-based learning is borne out of both my personal as well as professional experiences, echoing Clandinin and Connelly who suggest that:

*'Our research interests come out of our own narratives of experience and shape our narrative inquiry plotlines'. (2000:21).*

My journey began with experiences of compulsory education that left me feeling uncertain about my future and somewhat vulnerable. Whilst I attended a grammar school, which had high academic expectations of its pupils, I had an ambivalent relationship with education and left with results that I had anticipated but was also disappointed with. As the youngest child in a family with socially valuable cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990), such as professional occupations, there was an expectation that the children would access higher education which would then lead to a professional career. I watched my older sisters depart for university and was left with a feeling of underachievement. This was an experience which, for a considerable period of time I continued to find troubling and which fuelled my subsequent aspirations in education. At the age of 18 I was in a job that I found dissatisfying and disempowering and believed I had limited options ahead of me in terms of employment and prospects. I identified education as the 'way out' and an opportunity to challenge the perception of being 'not good enough'.

Following what I perceived as a 'second chance' coupled with success in night classes at a Further Education (FE) College I gained entry into higher education as a mature student and secured a Home Office secondment on the Certificate of Qualification in Social Work. This in itself felt like a significant achievement. With growing confidence in my academic abilities and employment prospects, my first experience of higher education became

transformational. I successfully completed my professional qualification and as a Probation Officer was offered the opportunity by my employers to continue higher education and study on a part-time undergraduate degree whilst working full-time, the completion of which gave me a more secure identity as a learner.

A change of career and employment as a researcher within a university gave me a further opportunity of higher education and I embarked upon a part-time two year master's degree one month after the birth of my first daughter. I continued to work whilst also studying and towards the end of this degree had my second daughter. My experiences of higher education, like that of many others, is imbued with the challenges of balancing aspiration along with a range of competing life commitments that were inextricably bound up in my understanding of my roles and identities – 'mother' and 'home maker', 'carer' for a parent, 'student' and 'worker' (including transitions in my 'worker' identity from 'practitioner' to 'researcher' to 'academic').

I was acutely aware that following compulsory education I had a number of second chances that arose from my own motivations and the support from employers. My curiosity in people's journeys into and through higher education was further stimulated when my career evolved from social work practitioner to lecturer. My lecturing career began in an FE college and shortly afterwards included working in a local university on social work programmes that offered part-time, full-time and work-based routes that aimed to widen participation in higher education and lead to an accredited

professional qualification in social work. My role involved supporting many students in both an educational and pastoral capacity sharing their stories of accessing and participating in social work education. The decision to engage in the study on which this thesis is based was therefore profoundly shaped both by my personal experience of engaging in education, work and then higher education as well as motivated by a desire to make sense of the stories students brought with them in their journeys through work and higher education in the domain of social work.

### **1.3 AIMS OF THE STUDY**

The main aim of the study was to explore the experiences of work-based learners on social work degrees identifying the transition(s) from unqualified to qualified practitioner and explore factors that shaped their journeys into and through higher education. The aim included making visible how participants accommodate multiple identities whilst moving between a variety of roles and how work-based learners manage the conflict and opportunities that potentially arise.

This topic is ever more apposite, and a 'worthy' topic (Tracy, 2010) for research given the current focus on social work education and the revival of work-based learning (section 1.5). As social work education endeavours to support the development of the social work workforce in a changing economic and policy climate, the need to focus on routes into social work remains critical. This is in terms of recruitment and progression (Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE], 2006; Hafford-Letchfield,



2007; General Social Care Council [GSCC], 2009; Hussein et al, 2009; The Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009) (section 2.2.2.1); in terms of achieving a representative workforce (Furness, 2007; Moriarty and Murray, 2007; GSCC, 2008; Smith et al, 2013; Health and Care Professions Council [HCPC], 2016) (section 2.2.2.1); and in terms of the recent directions in social work qualifications and the design of social work education (Moriarty and Manthorpe, 2013; Baginsky and Manthorpe, 2014; Croisdale-Appleby, 2014; Smith et al, 2013; Narey, 2014; Berry-Lound et al, 2016; Maxwell et al, 2016) (section 1.5).

This study focused on two work-based learning social work degrees and a total of 20 students and graduates from both these programmes (section 3.4). Using a narrative inquiry methodology (section 3.3) I provided opportunities for participants to share their lived and told experiences of higher education including both becoming and being a student. An understanding of institutions is arguably made more meaningful by examining the perspectives of students (Merrill, 1999) and exploring the *'nuanced representation of the lived experience of attending university'* (O'Shea, 2014:137).

In the current rapidly changing context of social work education I believe it is important to acknowledge the diversity of social work student experiences and consider the contribution of mature and 'non-traditional' students to higher education (Jones, 2006) (section 2.2.1). Whilst attention has been paid through widening participation policy initiatives (section 2.2.2) to recruiting students from groups that historically have been

underrepresented in higher education little is done to understand their particular needs with university systems designed with ‘traditional students’ in mind (Gilardi and Guglielmetti, 2011). By developing insights into the experiences and perspectives of students and graduates this thesis aims to draw *‘attention to the need for HE institutions themselves to change and adapt to the realities of students’ lives’* (Gale and Parker, 2014:735).

### **1.3.1 The Research Questions**

My understanding of social work and social work education led me to develop research questions that would focus on the holistic experiences of students undertaking work-based learning routes in social work education. I was interested in how the dynamic relationships between domains (places occupied by participants) in particular educational, occupational and domestic, impacted upon their experiences as students. I wanted to reflect the trajectory of these experiences to explore narratives that revealed students’ decisions to undertake a work-based learning route as unqualified practitioners as well as their experiences as students throughout their journey to becoming qualified practitioners. The research questions devised were:

1. *What factors influence students’ decisions to undertake the social work degree via work-based learning routes?*
2. *How do students experience the educational journey?*
3. *What personal and social challenges and opportunities do students identify whilst undertaking work-based learning routes in social work education?*

Further details of the research questions are provided in section 3.2. The research questions are mapped against each section of the literature review. Each of the three research questions is the focus of one of the three data chapters with the first research question being the subject of chapter four, the second the focus of chapter five and the third research question being the focus of chapter six. The research questions are then revisited in the discussion chapter and explored in relation to the findings of this thesis.

## **1.4 THEORETICAL APPROACH UNDERPINNING THIS THESIS**

The overarching theoretical approach adopted in this thesis is structural symbolic interactionism which pays particular attention to the meaning making processes of human beings as social actors and, of particular relevance to this thesis, provides a robust sociological social psychological approach to the issue of identity. In particular, I draw from the work of Stryker and identity theory (Stryker, 1987, 2008; Stryker and Burke, 2000), explored further in section 2.3.1. With a particular interest in the relationship between the individual and society, I draw on structural symbolic interactionism to highlight the relationship between individuals and social contexts, to understand their experiences, and importantly the meanings they generate in relation to such contexts (Stryker, 2008; Stryker and Burke, 2000; Burke and Stets, 2009). Structural symbolic interactionism, a development of symbolic interactionism, is based on the premise that

society is comprised of groups and institutions producing patterned interactions and role relationships that have a capacity to reproduce, creating durable social systems and structures (Stryker, 2008). Stryker also argues that differentiation is inherent in society and characterised by categories such as gender, race and age (2008). Structural symbolic interactionism also recognises that identity is based upon the internalization of role expectations and that in a modern society people have multifaceted lives with multiple roles and shifting and complex identities (Simon, 2003; Stryker, 2008).

In a structural symbolic interactionist approach *roles* are understood to be structured relationships that are socially constructed. As such they are based upon expectations and norms associated with a particular position and grounded in interaction with others ('mother' in relation to children, 'student' in relation to 'higher education institution'). *Identities* are the meanings attributed to roles and are formed when an individual begins to internalise the expectations of roles and define themselves by them and others assign a designated position based on 'organised social relationships' to the individual (Stryker 2008). According to Stryker people can have '*as many identities as there are organised systems of role relationships in which they participate*' (2008:20).

Structural symbolic interactionism also focuses on the social and institutional forces shaped by the diversity of populations (Stryker, 2008). In order to explore the complex relationship between the institutional contexts of higher education, social work practice, work and family and differentiation

based on gender, social class and age this thesis draws on structural symbolic interactionism. Interactions and relationships are particular features of this thesis reflecting this theoretical perspective and include interactions with other work-based learners, 'traditional' students (section 2.2.1), colleagues and family members. The thesis also explores the roles of work-based learners shaped by these interactions and the identities formed on the basis of these roles. In addition to work-based and domestic roles and their associated identities, this thesis focuses on the identities of 'learners' as well as 'students'. To differentiate between 'learner' and 'student' identities in this thesis, I draw on the work of Thunborg et al (2013) who argue that an identity of a 'learner' is shaped by a person's biography and an identity of a 'student' is specific to the context of higher education and is time constrained (section 2.4.1).

Structural symbolic interactionism, in particular the way it theorises identity, focuses on the concept of *salience* which has been discussed in a range of literature (Deaux, 1992; Stryker and Burke, 2000; Adams et al, 2006; Stryker, 2008; Warin and Dempster, 2007; Winkle-Wagner, 2009; Deaux and Burke, 2010) and is explored further in section 2.3.1.1. Salience refers to the primacy given to an identity at a given time and context and provides a useful conceptual tool in this thesis for understanding the co-existence of multiple identities. Stryker refers to 'identity change processes' (2008) which seek to explain how identities change depending on context and relational factors. In this thesis, I 'bridge' (Stryker, 2008:21) identity theory with the concept of 'transition', emphasising *becoming* as a form of transition (Gale and Parker, 2014). For the purposes of this thesis the

concept of 'transition' adds to the notion of 'identity change processes' and identity theory by giving insight into the complex changes in identities of work-based learners as movement between multiple roles occurs. The range of literature that explores transition in relation to students (Cree et al, 2009; Gale and Parker, 2014; O'Shea, 2014; Scott et al, 2014; Christie et al, 2016; Smith et al, 2016) provides ways of understanding the higher education journey of work-based learners and is explored in detail in section 2.3.3.

Whilst structural symbolic interactionism is the main theoretical perspective adopted in this thesis, narrative inquiry (section 3.3) is the overarching methodological approach. Both structural symbolic interactionism and narrative inquiry focus on *meanings* that are attributed to individual and social processes. Within structural symbolic interactionism roles and their related identities, such as those associated with being a student, are based on common meanings created through social interactions that serve to reproduce social systems. Narrative inquiry is based upon the ontological assumption that people create understandings and give meaning to their lives through stories or personal narratives situated within broader public narratives (Somers, 1994; Elliott, 2005; Phoenix and Sparkes, 2008; Andrews et al, 2013). A concern with meanings therefore provides an interface or 'bridge' (Stryker, 2008:21) between these traditions. Symbolic interactionism and narrative inquiry have previously been combined to explore identity (Ezzy, 1998; Smit and Fritz, 2008).

## **1.5 CURRENT CONTEXT OF SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION**

This study was undertaken during a period of change for higher education in the UK as a whole with fundamental changes in social work education in particular. The literature exploring the broader policy context of higher education including 'non-traditional' learners, widening participation and work-based learning is examined in detail in section 2.2. This section explores the context of social work education in which the study took place and in which this thesis is located.

Given the new work-based learning qualifying programmes being rolled out for social work it is important to acknowledge that work-based learning has a long tradition in social work education providing access to professionalisation for unqualified staff in the social work workforce through 'Grow Your Own' schemes (Dunworth, 2007; Harris et al, 2008; Manthorpe et al, 2011). These original schemes have been used variably by social work organisations as a mode of developing the social work workforce. Whilst taking a number of forms work-based learning routes are broadly defined by Harris et al (2008) as those routes supported by social work providers as a means by which their unqualified staff can become qualified. Work-based learning is a term that is described by the Higher Education Academy as encompassing, '*learning which accredits or extends the workplace skills and abilities of employees*' (Nixon et al, 2006:11). For the purposes of my thesis 'work-based learning' is a term I use to describe specified routes on social work degrees on which agencies support the participation of selected employees.

The term 'Social Worker' became a protected title (under the Great Britain Care Standards Act, 2000) only to be used by appropriately qualified professionals, developments which aimed at professionalising social work. The social work degree was introduced in 2003 as the qualification for social work professional practice taking the place of the Diploma in Social Work (DipSW) (Moriarty et al, 2008). The introduction of the social work degree meant the removal of the age restriction (22 years) placed on the social work qualification. This widened access to the social work qualification to school leaving students, described by Holström as '*the new non-traditional students*' in social work education (2012).

Social work education has recently been the subject of sustained scrutiny by government and governing bodies following growing concern about the standards and suitability of the recruitment and education of social workers contributing to the publication of a broad range of reports over the last decade (GSCC, 2008; Harris et al, 2008; GSCC, 2009; Social Work Task Force, 2009; Social Work Reform Board, 2010; Smith et al, 2013; Croisdale-Appleby, 2014 and Narey, 2014; Berry-Lound et al, 2016; Maxwell et al, 2016). The government have shown an interest in changing the governance of social work education through Teaching Partnerships as well as developing new routes to qualification with an emphasis on 'work-based' (Smith et al, 2013) including graduate schemes and apprenticeships. The new graduate schemes in social work education along with apprenticeships and Teaching Partnerships present new challenges for higher education



institutions (HEIs) and employers with the benefits for stakeholders yet to be fully established.

The relationship between social work education and HEIs has been changing progressively over the past seven years with the recent addition of so called 'elite' graduate schemes meaning that a mixed economy of social work programmes is now available. In addition to undergraduate and master qualifying programmes set in universities there are currently three graduate schemes situated within local authorities. These graduate schemes are Step-Up to Social Work which started in 2010, Frontline which started in 2014 and Think Ahead which started 2016, although they have only recently been introduced in the North East of England, the region within which this study took place. All three of these traineeships involve fast tracking graduates into posts for qualified practitioners via programmes built upon partnerships between local authorities and universities although often requiring the establishment of new relationships with universities based in other regions.

The emphasis in these graduate schemes is on recruiting high performing graduates (with a minimum 2:1 qualification). The new graduate schemes signal a move away from widening participation initiatives in social work education that include more participants with non-traditional qualifications than is evident in a more traditional higher education student population. This trend towards valuing higher qualifications amongst work-based learners was also evident when the qualification changed from the DipSW to the social work degree. Work-based learners on the DipSW included a

higher proportion of students with the lowest qualifications (Harris et al, 2008). Since the introduction of the social work degree however, work-based learners have tended to have higher qualifications than the previous DipSW students and also tend to be more qualified than the traditional route students (Harris et al, 2008).

Further provision in the form of degree level apprenticeships in social work are also currently being considered (Skills for Care, 2016) which would provide yet another avenue for qualifying as a social worker via a work-based learning route and provide local authorities with an opportunity to raise funds through the apprenticeship levy. In addition to the development of new routes, delivery and governance of existing social work programmes is being revisited in the form of Teaching Partnerships following two reports published in 2014 by Narey, *Making the education of social workers consistently effective* and Croisdale-Appleby *Re-visioning social work education: An Independent Review*. Teaching Partnerships constitute a radical restructuring of the governance of social work education (section 1.5) that positions local authorities as the lead partner in regional collaborative arrangements between local authorities and HEIs. The partnerships are configured differently in various parts of the country depending on the particular local arrangements. The key drivers are to attract more able students, strengthen the curricula and improve the quality of social work practice. Currently the measure of 'more able students' is linked to academic qualifications.

Flint and Jones argue that this new dynamic between HEIs and partners is more likely to engage people in the process of learning rather than alienate them (2011). However, the type of learning engaged in requires further scrutiny to determine whether it is focused more on technocratic learning (Dominelli, 1996) or critical and radical thinking. This was echoed by Preston-Shoot (2000) who suggested that social work education has lost its criticality and is in danger of being reduced to no more than preparation for practice.

There has been limited evaluation of the new initiatives in social work education (Smith et al, 2013; Berry-Lound et al, 2016; Maxwell et al, 2016). However, the overall climate of change highlights the need for a continued critical debate about the position of social work education within higher education as well as the role of work-based learning programmes amongst provision overall. This thesis is intended as a contribution to this debate considering the implications for students' experiences of studying, working and learning as work-based learners.

## **1.6            STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS**

This thesis is divided into seven chapters beginning with the introduction outlining key elements of the thesis and the context within which it is situated. Following the introduction, chapter two provides a discussion of the literature focused on the policy context, theory relating to identity and a range of empirical research relevant to the aims of the study. Chapter three comprises a discussion of methodological issues underpinning the study

including narrative inquiry as the overarching methodological approach.

This chapter also presents a discussion of the research design and data collection processes, including the rationale for the use of focus groups and individual interviews to elicit narratives of experience. A discussion of thematic analysis as the framework for analysing the data is also presented in chapter three followed by an exploration of ethical issues, the researcher/participant relationship and researcher reflexivity.

Findings from the study are presented in three data-based chapters with each presenting an analysis of the data in relation to one of the three research questions. Chapters 4 and 5 follow the trajectory of student experience, with chapter four centring on a consideration of the factors that influence participants' decisions to undertake a work-based learning route in social work education, the focus of research question one. Chapter five examines the data in relation to participants' educational journeys, the focus of research question two. Chapter six is the third data-based chapter and explores how participants accommodate multiple roles and related identities and also how they manage tensions and conflicts between these, responding to research question three.

The discussion chapter examines the findings and contribution of this thesis to understandings in the field of social work education. This thesis aims to make a contribution to knowledge in a number of areas including how work-based learners' experiences are shaped by the multiplicity of roles and associated identities. It also makes a contribution to understanding the transitions that work-based learners experience in *becoming* and *being* a

student in higher education and offers a heuristic as a theoretical framework for developing understandings of the work-based learner's journey. The discussion chapter also includes an evaluation of the study's methodology and explores the implications of this study for a number of key stakeholders in social work education at a time of change. This is followed by suggestions for future research borne out of this thesis with the final section offering some concluding comments and reflections.

## **1.7 CONCLUSION**

This chapter has provided an overview of key elements of this thesis and identified where these are explored in greater depth in the thesis. I have explored my motivation for undertaking the study on which the thesis is based, including my personal and professional interests in work-based learning. I have also provided a brief outline the research questions as the basis of the study identifying how these are mapped against the subsequent chapters. The main theoretical perspective underpinning this thesis, that of structural symbolic interactionism and identity theory and in particular the work of Stryker (1987, 2008), is also introduced. The context of this study has been established in this chapter, with an exploration of the rapidly changing landscape of social work education in England. The chapter has also explained the structure of the thesis identifying the content for each chapter.

# CHAPTER TWO

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter two explores three areas of literature which inform this thesis and research questions (section 3.2), specifically - policy relevant to this study, the underpinning theoretical framework and empirical research undertaken in the field. The chapter begins with section 2.2 providing an exploration of policy in higher education relating to 'non-traditional students', widening participation and work-based learning. This section presents the broader context of social work education and the backdrop to current developments presented in section 1.5. Following an examination of policy, section 2.3 provides a discussion of the theoretical perspective underpinning this thesis, in particular structural symbolic interactionism and identity theory which I have bridged to the concept of transition. The literature exploring transition includes that relating to the choices people make to become a work-based learner. A discussion of empirical research relevant to work-based learners is then presented in section 2.4. This is divided into three subsections each relating to roles and corresponding identities that are associated with educational, occupational and domestic domains respectively. Concluding comments for this chapter are presented in section 2.10.

## **2.2 THE POLICY CONTEXT**

This section explores literature focused on the policy context relevant to this study. This includes how policy has responded to the notion of ‘non-traditional’ students and the policy agenda of widening participation in higher education generally and social work education in particular.

Literature examining the impact of funding policies has also been discussed along with the policy framework of work-based learning in higher education, the typologies of work-based learning and programme provision. This literature provides an understanding of how the policy context impacts on the educational journeys of work-based learners in becoming and being students and therefore is relevant to all three research questions (section 3.2).

### **2.2.1 ‘Non-traditional’ Students in Higher Education**

Students who have historically been excluded from higher education are often referred to as ‘non-traditional students’ (Lillis, 2001). The concept of ‘non-traditional students’ relates to an ongoing debate regarding social justice and widening participation. Whilst still used by policy makers the term ‘non-traditional student’ is a contested term applied to students in higher education (Holström, 2012; Merrill, 2012) to denote a range of characteristics that impact on engagement. In policy terms this group is not a homogenous group and there is not a standard definition but can be subdivided using a range of factors such as age, ethnicity, full-time or part-

time students, mode of delivery, socio-economic factors, 'first generation' students, students with non-standard qualifications (Gilardi and Guglielmetti, 2011) and students who have not followed a linear progression from school to university (Caddell and Cannell, 2011). All of these distinguishing characteristics can position groups of students as different from a 'traditional student' in higher education thereby becoming 'non-traditional' students and can in isolation or combination impact upon experience. Woodrow (1999) suggests the explanations for under-representation of certain groups in higher education often concentrate on the shortcomings of the disadvantaged groups themselves rather than how institutions may create subtle barriers to inclusion.

Participants in this study share a common characteristic that could classify them as 'non-traditional' by virtue of being over 21 and therefore 'mature students' (McGivney, 2003). Other factors however, apply differentially to the participants such as prior educational attainment with six of the 20 participants having a first degree prior to undertaking the social work degree suggesting a more complex picture. The complexity of interrelated factors, and the contested nature of this binary definition of 'traditional' versus 'non-traditional' student, is evident in the diversity of the participants in this study. However, there are differences between the participants in this study and students on traditional routes which for the purposes of this study were non-work-based learning routes. Students on 'traditional' routes however, are not necessarily a homogenous group of 'traditional' students but can be comprised of students who have both followed a traditional higher education



trajectory (school > university > employment), those classed as traditional students, and students with 'non-traditional' characteristics (listed above).

Whilst it is important to acknowledge the differences of experiences impacted upon by these demarcations in relation to identity shaped by social structures and systems (Stryker, 2008), I exercise caution when using this term in this thesis to reflect the complexities of this terminology.

### **2.2.2 Widening Participation and Inequality in Higher Education**

Widening participation in higher education has been a key policy initiative in the UK for the last 50 years that has resulted in an increase in university places moving higher education from an elite to mass system of education (Barr, 2014). Literature relating to widening participation policy and provision for work based learners has focused on access and the alternative routes through higher education. This literature is briefly reviewed here to provide a contextual framework for the research questions (section 3.2).

Widening participation in higher education is premised on addressing social disadvantage and social justice (Robbins Report, 1963; National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education 1997 [hereafter the Dearing Report, 1997]; Bowl, 2003; DfES, 2003a; Hale, 2006; HEFCE, 2006; Callender, 2014) with disadvantage considered to be created by the configuration and impact of a variety of socio-economic factors arising from students' ethnicity, gender, age, disability and educational attainment. Cuff (2006) informed by Marxist theorists suggests that inequalities in higher education result from social

disadvantage and marginalisation and stem from the organisation of society around economic systems which determine social relations. Power relations, according to the Frankfurt School (Fromm, 1964; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972; Habermas, 1987), are constructed historically, privileging certain groups socially and oppressing others (Henn, 2009). Social disadvantage pervades every aspect of society and social institutions including higher education (Cuff et al, 2006). Therefore, in order for widening participation to be effective Burke (2012) suggests it must tackle the politics of social relations including inequalities such as age, gender, class, nationality, race and sexuality, differences she argues that are continuing to make a difference in higher education (2012). Marxist theorists argue that the educational system reproduces the culture of the dominant classes who have defined and imposed the worthiness of their own culture as something of value (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). The material, cultural and symbolic goods that are valued in society such as particular ways of using language and specific levels of educational attainment and certification are referred to as being 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1991) discussed further in section 2.3.2. This capital is not evenly distributed across society but shaped by a range of social factors including social class differences. Forrester-Jones and Hatzidimitriadou argue that:

*'education institutions are often viewed as the main agent in reproducing or changing structures of social inequality, simultaneously nurturing social, cultural and political 'elites' and opening up opportunities for meritocratic social mobility' (2006:611).*

Under-represented groups in higher education that are the focus of widening participation policy in the UK include students from the following four groups - from state schools or colleges, from specified socio-economic classes, from low-participation neighbourhoods and in those in receipt of Disabled Students' Allowance (Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA], 2015a). Statistics show that school leavers from socially disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to go to university with 12.3% of mature entrants to full-time first degree courses being from low-participation neighbourhoods in 2015/16 (HESA, 2015b).

Social disadvantage and widening participation in higher education were addressed by the Robbins Report published in 1963. This report recognised that there was a large pool of young people leaving school capable of obtaining higher qualifications but without the opportunity (Robbins, 1963; Barr, 2014). Furthermore, Robbins argued that social disadvantage was a barrier for the British economy on the world stage (Robbins, 1963). Robbins made the argument for expanding higher education from an elite provision to a mass system of education recommending that supply of university places should meet demand (Robbins, 1963). This resulted in new universities being built along with polytechnics during the 1960's. However, government funding for this was limited and expansion slowed down in the 1980's. The Education Reform Act 1988 Act paved the way for the abolition of the binary system and university status to be conferred on polytechnics in 1992.

The widening participation agenda was revived by Dearing's Report in 1997 with the government at that time producing targets for 50% participation in higher education which was later reviewed with a more conservative estimate of 40% by 2020 (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2009). The focus of the policy agenda for widening participation in higher education has broadly been on increasing numbers of students from underrepresented groups although arguments exist to look beyond quantifiable measures to '*making their whole experience of HE more accessible*' (Kimura et al, 2006:21) including a more inclusive curriculum design for work-based learning. However, whilst universities have reflected a commitment to widening participation within their policies and mission statements this is focused differentially on categories of students including young students and those from higher socio-economic groups (Davies and Williams, 2001; Reay et al, 2010). Reay et al (2010) goes on to suggest that there is a differential impact of the widening participation agenda amongst universities with elite universities having little impact on inequalities based upon social class and race contributing to the notion of a two tier system of higher education. Lillis also argues that:

*'Whilst there is at one level official support for expansion and inclusion, there are continuing tensions around the democratisation of higher education'* (Lillis, 2001:19).

It is also argued that neoliberal policies of widening participation in higher education should be viewed within the context of what Burke describes as increasing social and economic inequalities (2012). Despite considerable

investment in widening participation there remains '*persistent patterns of under-representation of certain groups*' (Burke, 2013:108). HEFCE (2006) argue that socio economic factors leading to disadvantage and disparity of access to higher education are a long term issue even though there has been significant growth in HE participation since the 1980s (Hale, 2006). Burke (2013) goes on to suggest that discourses of widening participation have been refocused away from social justice towards economic imperatives.

In parallel to the widening participation agenda there has been a series of fundamental funding changes leading to recent revisions to the student fee structure following the Browne Report (2010) into higher education funding and student finance. This is one of the latest in a number of changes to the financial support offered to universities beginning with the Conservative governments in the 1980s and 1990s and culminating in the replacement of student grants with loans. The New Labour government pursued this trend into the new millennium and it was during their administration that the maintenance grants were abolished. The subsequent Higher Education Act of 2004 introduced 'top-up' fees and following the Browne Report tuition fees were increased up to a maximum of £9000 per year. In 2015 student funding was extended to part-time students and in 2016 the Conservative Government announced further increases in tuition fees. The result of these changes has meant that the responsibility for funding has shifted towards students which Furlong and Cartmel describe as a shift from a 'social model' of funding towards a 'market model' (2009).

Thomas states that changes to student funding have led to increases in the financial pressures on students raising concerns about retention (2002).

Whilst initial indications suggest that an increase in tuition fees in 2012/2013 have not impacted upon engagement (Callender, 2014) there is evidence to suggest that the recent economic decline has led to decreased employer support for secondments which could impact on the participation of work-based learners in higher education (Mason, 2014).

#### **2.2.2.1 Widening Participation in Social Work Education**

Whilst social work is more successful than other courses in widening access to higher education some groups are still under-represented within social work education and the social work profession (Moriarty and Murray, 2007).

Historically social work has been predominantly a woman's profession (Harris et al, 2008; Furness, 2012; Khunou et al, 2012) with current statistics showing that 81% of registered social workers are women and 19% are men (HCPC, 2016). Gender has been a key issue in the historical development of social work, its roles in society and social welfare (Jordan, 2004; Shardlow and Nelson, 2005). Shardlow and Nelson suggest that Dame Eileen Youngusband, an eminent social work historian, argued that the history of poverty, the history of women and social work are woven together. Shardlow and Nelson further contend that:

*'still today, it is overwhelmingly women who are on the frontline of social work practice, both as service users and as workers'*  
(Shardlow and Nelson, 2005:2-3).

Men however, have featured in greater numbers in practice areas that required control (such as Probation) and are more prominent in managerial positions (McLean, 2003; Perry and Cree, 2003). There has however, been a decline in men's participation in social work since 1993 (McLean, 2003; Perry and Cree, 2003; Moriarty and Murray, 2007) with a further decline of 3% from 2006/7 to 2007/8 (GSCC, 2008). The overall decline in men's participation in social work is in part due to the fact that social work continues to be seen as a gendered profession populated predominantly by women and that this occupational segregation is associated with gender pay gaps (Moriarty and Murray, 2007). It is further argued that the removal of the requirement to have a social work qualification for Probation Officers in 1996 also resulted in a decline in numbers of men undergoing social work training (Perry and Cree, 2003; Moriarty and Murray, 2007). Perry and Cree go on to identify further complexities that they suggest may result in declining numbers of men including the low status of social work as a profession and that:

*'men's motives for entering social work (and particularly child care) may be seen to be questionable, given the construction of men as 'dangerous' to children'. (2003:380)*

The recruitment of men to social work qualifying programmes whilst low has been relatively stable for the past few years with figures from 2010 to 2013 showing that 15% of entrants on HCPC accredited social work degrees being men (Skills for Care, 2015). This is compared to 44% of the general higher education population. It would appear that women do not therefore appear to be 'disadvantaged' in accessing social work education degree

programmes. Based on statistical evidence, Bowl argues that the expansion of higher education has proved a very effective way of tackling gender inequality in HE increasing the number of students labelled as 'disadvantaged' including women (2001). However, women do appear to be disadvantaged in relation to sponsorships on social work programmes with a higher proportion of men than women being sponsored by employers on the work-based learning route on The Open University social work degree, the largest provider of work-based social work education in England (GSCC, 2008). Whilst higher education may have addressed some gender inequalities Baxter and Britton argue that women returning to education to participate in 'caring courses' reinforces:

*'traditional gender identities and to put less distance between them and their former lives than more academic courses'* (2001:100).

Social work courses have had comparative success in attracting 'non-traditional' students into higher education (Bowl, 2001; Neary, 2002; McLean, 2003; Perry and Cree, 2003; Moriarty and Murray, 2007; GSCC, 2008; Harris et al, 2008) although the picture is complex. There is evidence that on social work programmes there are higher proportions of older students (section 2.2.2.1) and in terms of ethnicity a higher proportion of black entrants than on other programmes but lower for Asian entrants. Furthermore, social work students have more diverse socio-economic backgrounds than the higher education student population as a whole (Moriarty and Murray, 2007; Harris et al, 2008; The Panel of Fair Access to the Professions, 2009; Skills for Care, 2015). The Langlands report (2005) stressed the continuing challenges in recruiting people representing the



diversity of local populations. This means understanding the subjectivities of different groups of potential students, what impacts on their ways of knowing and experiencing the world, and how this influences their journey into and through higher education. Differences in progression and achievement are noteworthy with men fairing less well than women in both these areas (Skills for Care, 2015). Other groups, in particular black and ethnic minority students, some reports indicate, are less likely to progress and less likely to receive a first class degree (Skills for Care, 2015).

Access, Kimura et al (2006) argue, should not just be measured in terms of numbers of recruits alone but is a more complex issue and should be evaluated in terms of how the whole experience is made more accessible. More flexible routes into qualifying programmes can widen access for a more diverse range of people (Bowl, 2001; Harris et al, 2008). One of the recommendations of the Raising the Standards report, 2007/08 (GSCC, 2009) was to consider how flexible routes into social work education could be supported in order to widen access for groups including those with financial and caring responsibilities which were more common barriers to participation than the level of previous academic qualifications (Harris et al, 2008; GSCC, 2009). Heyler et al suggest that work-based learning programmes need to fit the needs of the workplace but also to fit the needs of the individual and be accommodated into their lives (2011). This means offering flexible routes that are part-time providing '*HE in a manageable format*' (Heyler et al, 2011:25). The statistics for 2014/15 show that 21% of HE undergraduate students are part-time (HESA, 2015c) indicating that part-time attendance is still a sought after mode of study.

Aiming for greater flexibility in higher education that takes account of diversity has resulted in the establishment of a range of routes on the social work degree including work-based learning routes. The delivery modes that define the routes include a combination of factors which are reflected in the programmes explored in this study such as open access/work-based, part-time/full-time and distance learning/blended learning/face-to-face learning. Both universities in this study have made an explicit commitment to initiatives seeking to widen participation in higher education. The national distance learning university was predicated on the basis of widening participation and the local face-to-face university is a post 1992 HEI which has sought to recruit more 'non-traditional' students (Reay et al, 2010; Burke, 2012; Hoskins, 2012-13). My original intention was to explore the experience of work-based learners on social work degrees and their positioning within higher education as 'non-traditional' students. Work-based learning routes have been part of the policy initiatives to provide access to higher education for students classed as 'non'-traditional' and therefore widen participation (Harris et al, 2008; Watts and Waraker, 2008; Manthorpe et al, 2011). However, as the research progressed it became apparent that the participants, whilst all work-based learners, had more complex profiles individually and collectively.

### **2.2.3 Work-based Learning Policy**

Work-based learning has been a component of the widening participation agenda (Brennan and Little, 2006; Nixon et al, 2006) and has developed in response to the policy context of higher education. A number of definitions

have been offered to describe the encompassing term of 'work-based learning'. Eraut suggests that this can include learning for work, at work and through work (2004), a definition that captures the diversity of provision across the higher education sector. Lester and Costley suggest that any definition of work-based learning '*logically refers to all and any learning that is situated in the workplace or arises directly out of workplace concerns*' (2010:562). The Higher Education Academy (HEA) also uses a broad description of work-based learning, '*learning which accredits or extends the workplace skills and abilities of employees*' (Nixon et al, 2006:11).

In the past four decades the policy context has resulted in the changing scope and aims of higher education from an elite and compact system to one that needed to diversify to meet the demands of mass education (Boud and Solomon, 2001; Hale, 2006; Barnet and Di Napoli, 2008; Merrill, 2012). Boud et al say of work-based learning:

*'that it is one of the very few innovations related to the teaching and learning aspects of post-secondary education that is attempting to engage seriously with the economic, social and educational demands of our era'*. (Boud et al, 2001:3)

The catalogue of changes in both further and higher education in the 1990s, such as flexibility in entrance requirements and more accessible modes of study, has improved access for 'non-traditional' students widening educational as well as professional opportunities (McGivney, 2003). This created what McGivney described as '*a new landscape for adult learners*' (2003:3). This new landscape was accompanied by a refocusing of

programme provision with Daniels and Brooker suggesting that the role of universities has moved from '*nurturer of knowledge*' (2014:66) to a skills provider, what Neary describes as '*closing the gap between education, training and employment*' (2002:1).

A major review of work-based learning was published in the Leitch Report (2006) *Prosperity for all in the global economy*, a government commissioned report that explored the role of work-based learning. Leitch (2006) argued that if Britain was to be economically competitive educational provision needed to reflect demographic shifts. He proposed that with 70% of the workforce population in 2020 having completed their education combined with an ageing population, and with the flow of young people reducing, a focus on adult education is required suggesting an end to '*the front loading of educational provision*' (Davey and Jamieson, 2003:266).

Drawing on Leitch's recommendation for a progressive focus on adult education the statistics for higher education provide insight into current participation. Mature student status in higher education is usually defined as 21 years of age and over (McGivney, 2003) (section 2.2.1). Comparative statistics for higher education as a whole and social work students in particular, provide statistics for students under and over 24 years. In 2014/15 the total percentage of students aged over 24 years on undergraduate degrees was 17% (HESA, 2015d) compared to 65% of students on HCPC accredited undergraduate social work degrees (Skills for Care, 2015). This suggests that social work is a profession that attracts proportionately larger number of mature students into higher education.

Following the Leitch Report (2006) the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills published '*Skills for Growth: The national skills strategy*' (2009) which envisaged that by 2020, 40% of the population would be qualified at a higher education level. However, the report by the UK Commission for Employment & Skills, *Ambition 2020: world class skills and jobs for the UK* (2010), another Government commissioned report, suggested that this was an ambitious goal and urged a broader vision for skills development. The substantial growth in HE in the UK since the 1990s has been largely attributed to globalisation (Boud and Solomon, 2001). Neoliberalism has reinforced the economic importance of higher education (Olssen and Peters, 2007) with the UK now needing to compete within a globally expanding knowledge economy to remain competitive (George, 2006). Higher education therefore becomes critical to the changing needs of the workplace (Brennan and Little, 2006; Nixon et al, 2006; Daniels and Brooker, 2014). This is what Solomon refers to as the 'new vocationalism' in higher education which he argues was the result of:

*'the mobilisation of economic discourses in the educational policy formulation of governments'* (Solomon, 2005:96).

Over the last four decades universities have engaged more proactively in the development of higher education programmes which have been specifically aimed at meeting particular needs of industry. In general these programmes aim to redress a perceived under investment in workforce development requiring universities to engage with wider populations in particular adult learners and employers rather than school leavers (Lester

and Costley, 2010). This workforce development trend is a means by which 'non-traditional' learners, who have not followed the traditional trajectory of higher education students of school > university > employment, can access higher education (Nixon et al, 2006) and has therefore significantly contributed to an agenda of widening participation (Brennan and Little, 2006). Boud and Solomon have termed this change in HEI provision as a '*repositioning of the academy*' (2001:23) changing the role of higher education from one of elitism and personal development to a means of growing the economy and global competitiveness (Thunborg et al, 2013). The UK Commission for Employment & Skills argues that:

*'We have to fundamentally change how individuals and businesses treat skills acquisition and development: from a one-off experience in our youth to a lifelong commitment' (2010:109).*

This policy shift has coincided with work-based learning in the form of '*credentialising*' the workforce (Beddoe, 2011:33).

### **2.2.3.1 Typologies of Work-based Learning**

Despite the policy drive towards work-based learning in higher education the position of this type of provision is contested. Work-based learning has, Shaw et al argue, (2011), not traditionally been perceived as a legitimate mode of higher education and according to Nixon et al there are still challenges in making work-based learning mainstream moving beyond a '*cottage industry supported by enthusiasts*' (2006:13). Newby cautions against cultural hostility by HEIs towards vocational learning and the convergence of intelligence and its application (2005). There is a need to

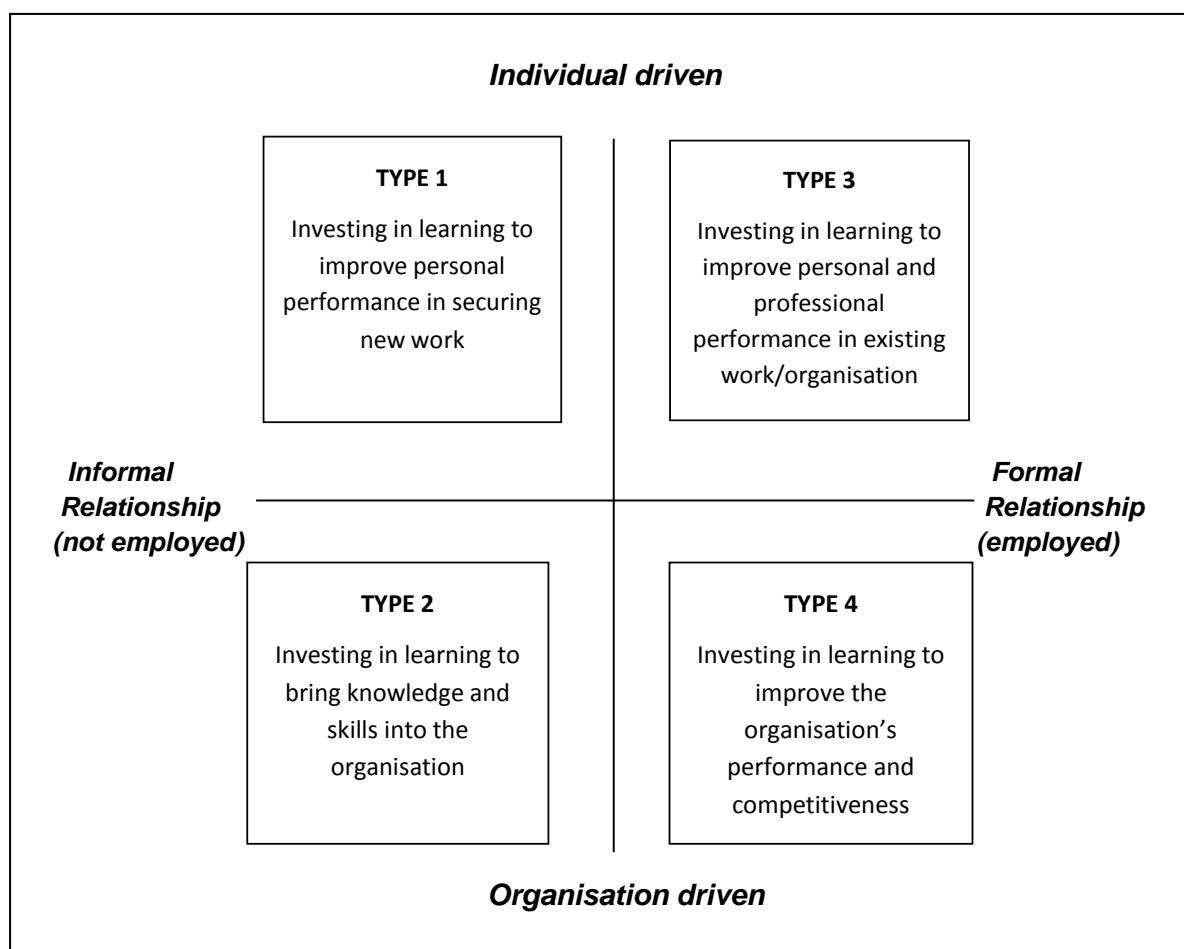
consider more critically the relationship between education and employability. Heyler et al argue that rather than undermine each other's contribution education and employability should be seen as complimentary with the skills being mutually compatible:

*'It is unhelpful, and untrue to only associate employability skills with 'training' and claim that it takes time away from studying a 'real' academic subject; the reality is that the two overlap considerably* (2011:30).

Debates around work-based learning are, Boud et al (2001) suggest shaped predominantly by educators rather than employers which may limit the way learning is understood, creating a false separation from working. Borrowing from Boud et al (2001), Flint and Jones argue that the notion of *'contextualised workplace praxis'* (2011:5) establishes a partnership approach to work-based learning that shifts the exclusive location away from HEIs encouraging a more dynamic approach to the relationships amongst the partners. A focus of government initiatives in the 1990s encouraged the development of strategies between HEIs and employers (Sobiechowska and Maisch, 2007) to cross *'the cultural bridge between learning and work'* (Nixon et al, 2006:5). This however, has not been without challenges and requires a renegotiation of relationships between stakeholders currently evident in the new Teaching Partnership arrangements (section 1.5). However, Copnell argues that the focus on the economic market suggests that power to define skills need has been placed in the hands of employers ignoring the contribution of professions, service users and education (2010).

The typology of work-based learning created by Nixon et al (2006) considers the pedagogical approaches to work-based learning arguing that the challenge is in recognising and valuing the difference between the two domains of learning, those of the academy and the workplace. Nixon et al (2006) suggest that these two domains of learning can be better aligned to create a shared domain that shapes a work-based learner's development both academically and in terms of competence (2006). This is particularly relevant to the current context of social work education and new graduate schemes and one of the principles underpinning Teaching Partnerships (Berry-Lound et al, 2016) (section 1.5).

**Figure 1: Work-based learning typology**



(Nixon et al, 2006:38)



Whilst Nixon et al (2006) argue that recognising the two domains of learning, practice and academia remains one of the challenges of a professional programme, Eraut (2004) suggests the workplace and the academy differ in the value placed upon different kinds of knowledge and how knowledge is acquired. This alignment of the domains however, contributes to a discourse that Solomon argues is reliant upon the assumption of a natural '*conflation of working and learning*' (2005:99) which he suggests has an impact upon identity construction that is both complicated and problematic (section 2.4.2). This is in part due to the identities being located in different institutional sites. This is an area that needs careful consideration in the transition for work-based learners into higher education and professional programmes, a key focus of this study.

The power of education providers and employers in determining provision is a key debate in social work education at the present time. Holmes et al (2009) suggest that the emphasis has shifted from privileging the provider (academic staff) who now facilitate and guide learning rather than controlling it. The focus in this new model of learning is more on the mutual needs of the employer and employee who become more active in negotiating and determining their learning needs rather than purchasing off the shelf programmes. The first and traditional position of work-based learning is the academy as the provider looking out to the work context. The second position is from the context of work and employer-led learning which looks to the academy for support. This more radical approach to higher education is one that Holmes et al recognise does not fit comfortably within traditional

systems and structures (2009). This second model is the model that is currently being adopted by the new policy agenda for social work education, a move from the model of secondment onto university based degree programmes requiring a renegotiation of partnerships between local authorities and HEIs.

Shaw et al (2011) suggest that repositioning work-based learning involves crossing boundaries between work and academia. For the learner crossing these boundaries means a transition that according to Shaw et al offers an important learning experience (2011). Tuomi-Grohn et al suggest that:

*‘Crossing boundaries involves encountering difference, entering into territory in which we are unfamiliar and, to some significant extent therefore, unqualified’ (2003:4).*

The challenges as well as the opportunities that crossing boundaries creates is a key area of interest for this study.

The higher education policy context relating to this study draws from policy relating to ‘non-traditional’ learners, widening participation and work-based learning. With recent developments in social work education (section 1.5) the policy context of work-based learning continues to develop changing the landscape of social work programme provision and the student population. The following section moves from a discussion of literature focused on policy to the theoretical literature with a particular focus on identity.

## 2.3 THE THEORETICAL CONTEXT: IDENTITY

This section will explore the literature relating to the theoretical approach to identity adopted in this thesis introduced in section 1.4. Identity has been the focus of a large number of studies from various academic disciplines including philosophy, anthropology, psychology and sociology. Stryker and Burke argue that '*the common usage of the term identity belies the considerable variability in its conceptual meaning and its theoretical role*' (Stryker and Burke, 2000:284). Essentially, disciplines tend to focus on one or more of what Vignoles et al describe as the different levels of identity as a, '*personal, relational or collective phenomenon*' (2011:2). Theories are generally conceptualised on the basis of '*biological characteristics, psychological dispositions and socio-cultural positions*' (Vignoles et al, 2011:2) and are interested in understandings of identity in terms of category or process. Yon argues that this distinction is significant because 'category' implies that identity is fixed and 'process' implies it is an emergent construction (2000). Hall (1992) devised a framework within which the different disciplinary perspectives of identity are organised that recognises the epistemological approaches of each. This framework identified 3 competing conceptualisations of identity that overlapped – the enlightenment subject (that sees identity as a linear development), the sociological subject (that sees identity as produced through social interaction) and the postmodern subject (that sees identity as never complete and fragmented).

Psychological theories are rooted in the work of Erikson, Marcia and Piaget and sociological theories in the work of Mead, Durkheim, Habermas and Stryker (Jones et al, 2013). These approaches have increasingly converged with a common interest in how individual behaviour relates to the social context which has led to the development of a social psychological approach offering interdisciplinary understandings of identity formation (Côté and Schwartz, 2002). The sociological social psychological theoretical perspective of structural symbolic interactionism and identity theory (Stryker, 2008) draws from both the disciplines of psychology and sociology and provides a perspective that gives particular prominence to the way in which social structures shape experience, with structures being '*embodied in everyday language and interaction behaviors*' (Stryker, 1995:327). With a focus on roles, and the formation of identities in relation to roles, structural symbolic interactionism and identity theory provide a particular perspective relevant to this thesis. This perspective highlights how experience is shaped through multiple and shifting identities and 'identity change processes' affected by broader social structures within which experience occurs (Stryker, 2008). This thesis draws on this perspective to give valuable insight into student experiences of higher education, specifically the complex journeys of work-based learners on social work degrees.

As the main theoretical perspective underpinning this thesis, structural symbolic interactionism (Stryker, 1987, 2008; Stryker and Burke, 2000; Burke and Stets, 2009) provide insights into the multiplicity of identity and the salience (Deaux, 1992; Stryker and Burke, 2000; Warin and Dempster,

2007; Stryker, 2008). In this thesis, I have ‘bridged’ (Stryker, 2008:21) structural symbolic interactionism to other theoretical concepts of ‘transition’ (Gale and Parker, 2014; O’Shea, 2014; Scott et al, 2014) and ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu, 1991; Greenbank, 2006; Beagan, 2007) (section 2.3.2). In this way, I have extended the framework of structural symbolic interactionism to provide further insight into participants’ experiences of higher education and the impact on identity for work-based learners. As a key theme of this thesis, the subject of identity relates to all three research questions in this study (section 3.2) and the experiences of work-based learners *becoming* and *being* students. As such this section provides a theoretical perspective on which to explore the data generated in response to these questions.

### **2.3.1 Structural Symbolic Interactionism and Identity Theory**

A structural symbolic interactionist approach to identity was developed from symbolic interactionism, grounded in the work of Mead (1934) and Blumer (1969). Symbolic interactionism views society as being created through people’s interpretations, with individuals free to define situations and therefore being in a state of flux, lacking in organisation and structure (Burke and Stets, 2009). In addressing the limitations of symbolic interactionism, Stryker puts forward a structural approach, which asserts the significance of social structures (social class, gender, race) arguing that the location of individuals within structures impacts on the meanings derived from experiences. Stryker argues that social structures and power shape, *‘who comes together in what settings to interact with what interactional*

*resources for what social purposes'* (1991:23). 'Structural symbolic interactionism' views society as stable and shaped by '*patterned regularities that characterize most human action*' (Stryker, 1980:65). These patterns, Stryker argues, are durable, resistant to change and capable of reproducing themselves (Stryker, 2008). Structural symbolic interactionism proposes that ideology and dominant values contribute to the construction of social structures and systems and thereby give direction to norms and expectations (Stryker, 2008; Torres et al, 2009). Stryker goes on to argue that the lack of homogeneity in society results in differentiation shaped by power and conflict reinforcing the interests of those in power and the power of institutions with:

*'complex mosaics of differentiated groups, communities and institutions, cross-cut by a variety of demarcations based on class, age, gender, ethnicity, religion etc'* (2008:19).

Dominant institutions, such as work and education, can legitimise identities through systematic interaction (Torres et al, 2009) that perpetuates relationships based upon power (Castells, 1997).

Stryker (2008) proposes that identities are cognitive schema which are derived from roles that people perform ('worker', 'student', 'father' and 'mother'). *Roles* are understood as socially constructed expectations and norms of behaviour that are attached to particular positions in society relative to others and are performed through interactions. Roles become an integral part of social capital, they '*constitute the structure of social networks and imply obligations, expectations, information and norms*' (Matsueda and

Heimer, 2004:171). When occupying a role, a person's behaviour is guided by these expectations and obligations. The meanings individuals associate with roles are based upon those that are shared and arrived at through social interaction in everyday life (Scott, 2015).

It is through an association with a particular role, that people form an *identity* based on this role, what Simon describes as '*an internalized set of role expectations*' (2004:23). Identity is then tied to a role, as well as being tied to positions embedded in social relationships. Identity theory proposes that:

*'Identities require that persons be placed as social objects by having others assign position designations to them and that persons internalize the designations. Identities are then self-cognitions tied to roles, and through roles, to positions in organized social relationships'* (Stryker, 2008:20).

Identities then form the basis of how people understand who they are and how they behave within certain contexts (Stryker, 1968, 1987, 2008; Burke and Stets, 2009; Scott, 215). Identities in this sense could be described as resources which are utilised by people to make sense of both themselves and their place in society (Tomlinson, 2013) providing established scripts of 'how to be' (Moss and Pittaway, 2013:1006).

Symbolic interactionists would argue that there is a dynamic relationship between 'structure' and 'agency' in the context of identity formation. A structural symbolic interactionist definition of structure is '*patterned interactions and relationships*' (Stryker, 2008:19) based upon for example

age, race and gender. The concept of agency is described by Biesta and Tedder as *'the ability to exert control over and give direction to one's life'* (2007:135). Agency is expressed through individuals attaching meanings to roles in order to achieve consistency with established identities (Stryker and Serpe, 1982; Stets and Burke, 2000; Burke and Stets, 2009). The duality of structure and agency in identity construction presents individuals as either passive or active in this process (Haynes, 2006). Alvesson suggests that identity construction could be viewed as either a product of 'effort and capacity' (2011:211) or 'agency', or the 'outcome of social forms and discursive forces' (2011:211) aligned to 'determinism'. Merrill however, suggests that dichotomising structure and agency is unhelpful arguing that:

*'behaviour is never fully agentic or structurally determined but an interaction between the two. At particular points in people's lives one may be more dominant than the other'* (2014:5).

Rather than presenting people as subject to determinism and being passive in the formation of identity, structural symbolic interactionism recognises agency and emphasises the social formation of identity. The proposed duality of agency and structure creates an interaction between the spontaneous 'I' and the socialised 'me' (Thunborg et al, 2013). Winkle-Wagner challenges the suggestion that choice is available to everyone and suggests that agency is limited (section 2.3.1.1). The conflict between agency and structure in the construction of identity is highlighted here, suggesting that systems of power and privilege influence the primacy of an identity in a particular context (Jones et al, 2013).



Reflecting the core approach of a structural symbolic interactionist perspective Stryker developed identity theory (1968, 2008) central to which is the notions of multiplicity of identity and salience. These concepts will be explored in the next section and are particularly useful in this thesis in providing ways of understanding identities within complex and multifaceted societies.

### **2.3.1.1 Multiplicity and Salience**

Structural symbolic interactionism and identity theory also recognises that a modern and complex society results in individuals participating in a proliferation of roles and therefore developing multiple and shifting identities (Simon, 2004; Stryker, 2008). Multiple identities, and how they co-exist, have been the focus of much research and literature (Beck, 1992; Baxter and Britton, 2001; Byrne and Flood, 2005; Watts and Waraker, 2008; Deaux and Burke, 2010; Jones et al, 2013; Moss and Pittaway, 2013; O'Shea, 2014). This is particularly significant in this study as work-based learners when entering higher education seek to accommodate the role of student in addition to their existing identities, including amongst others personal and work-based identities, some of which may have formed on the basis of roles.

The co-existence of multiple identities in different domains (educational, occupational and domestic) means that identity is fluid across and within contexts and over time. Moss and Pittaway (2013) argue that identity coherence is achieved, albeit temporary, by configuring overlapping layers of identity each comprising elements of narrative which are organised in

relation to time and context which enables individual identity to '*achieve temporary and contingent coherence*' (2013:1006). However, being dependent on time and context they are in continuous tension with one another and therefore liable to change. MacLure proposes in her study of teacher identity in Australia that identity is a site of continuing struggle (1993). McSweeney (2012) suggests that approaches that propose an integrated identity are no longer viable. Neither are postmodern concepts that stress the continuous construction of identity as they leave identity so malleable that it becomes impossible to rationalise (ibid). Structural symbolic interactionism provides a perspective that accommodates both stability and change (McSweeney, 2012), agency and structure in the negotiation of identities across domains.

Structural symbolic interactionism also recognises that conflict can arise with plurality of identities. Conflict between identities has been the focus of a number of studies (Hogg et al, 1995; Castells, 1997; Hird, 1998) with the multiplicity of identity being a source of 'stress and contradiction' (Castells, 1997). Conflict and tension amongst identities however, can be viewed as productive resulting in negotiation between identities rather than a silencing of the parts, and consequently of diversity (Hird, 1998). Hird goes on to say that by placing oneself at the border of an identity gives a person the opportunity to understand identity in relation to power and privilege (1998). When conflict arises between roles or between identities and the ability to meet the expectations of these, people seek '*dissonance-reduction*' (Hogg et al, 1995:257) in order to achieve congruence. New roles, such as being

a student, create uncertainty about 'how to be' and result in tension and instability in identity construction. Moss and Pittaway argue that:

*'The move back to stability involves reconciling and incorporating these new roles and circumstances within our narratives of identity, which may involve reconfiguring this narrative as we attempt to achieve coherence'* (2013:1006).

The concept of salience is central to identity theory and provides a way of understanding the co-existence of multiple identities and how, in a given context, one aspect of identity is given primacy (Deaux, 1992; Stryker and Burke, 2000; Warin and Dempster, 2007). Stryker and Burke contend that salience is the probability of an identity being invoked in a particular context (2000). Along with Simon (2004), Stryker and Burke argue that the higher the salience of an identity in relation to others the more likely the individual will choose certain behaviours in accordance with the expectations associated with that identity (2000). In this sense salience involves agency, the ability to take independent action, an approach supported by Ethier and Deaux who suggest choice is exerted through 'claiming an identity' and that:

*'what particular identity is claimed can depend on situational cues that make an identity salient or that fit with one's own priorities'* (1994:243).

Commitment is considered to be a source of salience (Stryker and Serpe, 1982; Stryker, 2008) – the salience of an identity is predicted by the commitment to a relationship associated with a particular role. Commitment

to an identity arises from the number of relationships linked to an identity (interactional commitment) and the emotional attachment to the relationships associated with the identity (affective commitment) (Stryker, 2008). Serpe argues that the prior commitments of students are affected by entering new relationships at university which in turn impact on the salience of identities (1987). Some literature suggests that based on organising principles including gender and race, identities are positioned in a hierarchy of salience with the most pervasive and encompassing being located at the top of the hierarchy (Stryker, 2008; Burke and Stets, 2009; Simon, 2004).

I have explicitly focused this study on the perspective of structural symbolic interactionism and identity theory and believe that this overarching theoretical perspective offers insights into the impact of structure and power on identity formation also allowing for agency. In this way, personal narratives can be understood in relation to public narratives and public narratives can be understood in relation to personal narratives. Whilst I would argue that the theoretical perspective I have adopted has provided a valuable perspective I accept the limitations of this and acknowledge that the application of different theories and disciplines may offer alternative understandings of this data (section 2.3).

Whilst structural symbolic interactionism and identity theory offer valuable insights there are some particular elements that require further scrutiny. Identity theory proposes that there is a salience hierarchy with which identities are organised. The concept of a hierarchy however, suggests a

fixed order and does not fully explain the complexities of multiple identities in relation to power and interaction between identities with Torres et al arguing that '*many individuals possess both privileged and oppressed identities*' (2009:587). In this study, the notion of fluidity reflects the multiplicity of identities of work-based learners straddling a variety of domains and the movement across and within each. Gale and Parker's concept of '*transition as becoming*' (section 2.3.3) suggests a more continuous and iterative process involving the negotiation and re-negotiation of identities recognising the influence of structure and agency and reinforcing the notion of fluidity across time and context.

The perspective of structural symbolic interactionism and its approach to agency has also been criticised. Winkle-Wagner (2009) in her study of black women attending college in America, challenges the suggestion of Stryker and Burke's (2000) that choice is available to everyone and emphasises the role of structure. She argues that choice is constrained by HEIs who privilege certain identities over others stating that identity can be '*imposed, coerced or forced upon a person through external conditions*' (2009:41). She goes on to say that '*aspects of one's identity are ultimately chosen*' (2009: 153). Identity theory reinforces the significance of structure and society being shaped by demarcations, but drawing on the work of both Torres et al (2009) (above) and Winkle-Wagner (2009), it could be argued that identity theory does not fully address the tensions between structure and agency.

The underpinning principles of structural symbolic interactionism have been criticised for being open to interpretation and reinterpretation with no rules governing the emerging picture of reality (Esposito and Murphy, 2001). However, structural symbolic interactionism attempts to address this by reinforcing the significance of enduring social structures and systems. This criticism also ignores the contextualisation of knowledge and the rigour with which a researcher can approach data making visible the researched and researcher's standpoint. In this sense, a symbolic interactionist approach is no more biased than other theoretical perspectives.

Howard offers a challenge to identity theorists that accommodates future socio-political challenges of modern society. She argues that whilst the everyday lives for most individuals are relatively stable, larger cultural contexts can be unstable and less predictable. This is evident globally. This requires a focus to identity that accommodates:

*'structures of everyday lives and the sociocultural and socio-political realities in which those lives are lived but without imposing a false coherence on that synthesis'* (Howard, 2000:388).

### **2.3.2 Cultural Capital and Identity**

The work of Bourdieu (1991) is also relevant to the themes in this thesis of identity and widening participation in higher education. Bourdieu developed the concept of 'cultural capital' referring to the cultural, material and symbolic goods that are valued in society such as language, skills, educational attainment. According to Bourdieu cultural capital is shared with other members of the same social class contributing to a sense of

collective identity. This echoes the approach structural symbolic interactionism through the notion of shared understandings influencing behaviour. Some forms of cultural capital are more valued than others with cultural capital therefore being a source of social inequality. Social class has been the subject of a number of studies exploring participation in higher education and the barriers that some groups of students experience (Bowl, 2001; Universities UK, 2002; Reay et al 2010; Howard and Davies, 2013; Thunborg, 2013) including the impact this has on identity construction.

Understanding structural influences is important in order to be able to make higher education accessible and understand how people experience it. Greenbank suggests that Bourdieu characterises universities 'as *organisations that promote, legitimise and reinforce middle class values*' (2006:5). In this way, Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital (1991) is helpful in understanding the experiences of 'non-traditional' students entering higher education. Merrill argues that the transition into higher education can create challenges for working class students and how they position themselves in relation to it (2012). Using a class based system to categorise students is not unproblematic. The broad range of criteria that can classify individuals as 'non-traditional' students suggest that this is a more complex issue than Greenbank (2006) and Merrill (2012) might appear to suggest (section 2.2.1). Whilst Bourdieu's work has been criticised for being deterministic (Swartz, 1997) Bourdieu has also argued that he was not conceptualising a rigid system of being but a strongly ingrained process of socialisation (1993) therefore allowing for agency.

The ways in which students engage in higher education highlight issues of congruence between the cultural capital valued by higher education and the cultural capital of the individual. Greenbank (2006) argues that for some social classes the match between their cultural capital and the culture students encounter in the field of higher education can create greater difficulties in adapting to university life. Rather than lacking cultural and social capital, Beagan (2007) argues that 'working class' students possess the 'wrong' cultural and social capital which arises, Kiefer suggests, '*from the reality of their lives*' (2000, in Beagan, 2007:131). Weil argues that for 'non-traditional' learners (section 2.2.1) lacking in 'cultural capital' university entry is experienced as a dislocation and disjunction (1986). This dislocation centres on the social class, gender and ethnic difference between the overall ethos of the institution and that of 'non-traditional' students (Weil, 1986).

### **2.3.3 Transitions in Higher Education**

Transition is an important conceptual framework used in this thesis that links to 'identity change processes' as identified by Stryker in his discussion of identity theory (2008). Theory of transition and structural symbolic interactionism have been combined in other studies (Slay and Smith, 2011; Smith et al, 2016). There is a growing body of literature exploring the nature of transition in higher education (Ecclestone, 2007; Esmond, 2012; Gale and Parker, 2014; Martin et al, 2014; O'Shea, 2014). A number of definitions of 'transition' in relation to students and higher education have been offered in the literature. Gale and Parker (2014) define transition as '*change navigated by students in their movement within and through formal*



*education'* (2014:734). Scott et al state that as well as transitions being understood as defining moments in which change occurs transitions are continual and *'tied to everyday and ongoing processes of becoming, which are less explicit and identifiable'* (2014:96). At these times, there is movement between contexts resulting in repositioning which can be both fluid and contradictory (ibid) with transitioning occurring between *'existing, expected and desired identities'* (O'Shea, 2014:138). Ecclestone says of transition and identity:

*'an emphasis on identity means that transitions become problematic if a viable identity in one context does not transfer to another. Having to reconstruct an identity narrative can disrupt a viable way of being in a context, making transitions de-motivating and stressful'* (2007:21).

Transition is therefore not necessarily movement from one place to another but requires *'revisions in identity'* (O'Shea, 2014:139) which are shaped by *'turning points'* (O'Shea, 2014:140) resulting in a reorientation and re-evaluation of identity. Rather than occurring at points of crisis and one off events, Christie et al argue that transition is an ongoing process (2016) echoing the work of Gale and Parker (2014) and Scott et al (2014). As such Scott et al argue that *'transitions thus are complex processes of change, resistance, re/positioning and subjective construction'* (2014:96).

Esmond (2012) identified three types of narratives of transition in his study of mature students. At the age of 18, the traditional age of entry to higher education, his participants provided the following narratives for non-participation. These were firstly, *'narratives of conformity'* (based on socio

cultural factors, higher education was 'not for us'); secondly, '*narratives of exception*' (people whose participation was natural but they were prevented by individual circumstance); and thirdly, '*narratives of transgression*' (people who had previously failed to integrate into school) (2012:357-358). This typology provides ways of understanding some of the reasons why students access higher education as mature students but it does not provide insight into the complexity of this decision.

Another typology of transition that I have found particularly useful in relation to the data in this study is offered by Gale and Parker (2014). Based on a review of higher education research they produced a typology of transitions for university students and argue that the way we interpret transitions is important epistemologically. Their typology comprises three conceptions of student transition – '*transition as induction*', '*transition as development*' and '*transition as becoming*'. Transition as induction focuses on students being successfully integrated into university. Transition as development sees transition through development over a period of time. Gale and Parker argued that the third type of transition, 'transition as becoming', is more inclusive and student centred. Transition as becoming emphasises the complexities of life and the diversity of experience with transition as continuous fragmented movements. Gale and Parker's typology is a very useful model for exploring the range experiences of work-based learners across the student trajectory of *becoming* and *being* a student and underpins discussion in this thesis.

Developing a student identity could '*be assumed as a natural part of the transition to university*' (Martin et al, 2014:200-01) for 'traditional' students, those moving from school directly to university on a full-time degree.

Research on transitions for students has tended to focus on the first year of study due to the neo-liberal policy context that requires universities to address attrition rates to protect funding (Christie et al, 2016). This approach has resulted in induction policies to aid the student's integration into university culture. Gale and Parker (2014) suggest this is managed by institutions through a series of strategies but places an onus on students to 'fit in' in ways that are determined as desirable and legitimate by universities. This means that '*successful transition requires students to navigate existing institutional pathways or systems*' (Gale and Parker, 2014:741) with successful integration being measured by good student retention and is therefore highly desirable by universities.

Students are encouraged to participate in a range of social and pedagogical activities as well as establishing relationships with other members of the community to develop '*routines and rituals that will enhance their sense of belonging*' (Martin et al, 2014:204) enabling identity formation (Watts and Waraker, 2008; Jack, 2010; Chapman, 2012-13). Jack (2010) in his discussion of attachment theory establishes the significance of place more broadly. A physical presence as part of the experience for campus based students could enhance a sense of attachment and belonging (Thomas, 2012). This may be particularly relevant for full-time students on campus based programmes however, with the changing profile of students including more part-time, mature, work-based and online learners, policy and

provision focused on students with 'traditional' characteristics does not meet the needs of the more diverse student population. If developing a student identity is enhanced by these strategies developing a student identity for 'non-traditional' students may therefore not be straightforward and alternative methods of integration may need to be found. Watts and Waraker (2008) argue that integration into the programme (transition as induction) may also be more challenging for mature learners and work-based learners where insufficient value is placed on what they bring to the course in terms of prior experiential understanding.

For distance learners, the lack of ritual acts of attendance and shared space means that integration can present particular challenges. Martin et al (2014) suggest that students studying online are more 'passive' learners whose possible isolation and exclusion from the learning process can make this a potentially more anxious and painful process of integration. They suggest that a shared environment helps to locate students within a higher education establishment and that a '*barren environment*' (2014:204) can occur for online learners through '*asynchronous learning*' (Martin et al, 2014:204) which may threaten identity development. Asynchronous learning refers to online interaction that can occur at any time rather than requiring participation of individuals at the same time. For students who are socially isolated online learning can lead to a '*cloak of anonymity*' (Martin et al, 2014:204) and an identity based on stereotypes rather one based upon meaningful reflection. Online learning however, need not always be problematic and for a student lacking in academic confidence studying online can provide space to create a student identity away from the glare of face-to-face scrutiny.

Moss and Pittaway (2013) also recognise the complexities for distance learners of managing the boundaries of identity. They suggest that identity transitions can be problematic due to the role of a student being undertaken in the domestic sphere along with roles of wife/husband, mother/father, carer (2013). The impact upon existing relationships can '*lead to questioning roles*' (McSweeney, 2014:319). Watts and Waraker also argue that crossing identity boundaries is problematic for work-based learners and can also cause confusion when on placement, particularly when students are in their usual places of work where interactions with others are established as 'colleagues' (2008). Identity transitions continue to occur throughout a student's journey in higher education and can be periods of tension but are also opportunities for transformation. O'Shea recognised the significance of passing an assignment as '*indicating belonging but also redefined learner identities*' (2014:155).

Crossing frontiers also requires students to navigate boundaries across institutional sites, spheres of accountability and ultimately the identity boundaries (Solomon, 2005) of 'worker', 'learner' and 'student'. Work-based learners will often belong to a number of communities of practice based in occupational and educational domains. Lave and Wenger developed the concept of 'communities of practice' to describe a group of people engaged in collective learning (Wenger, 1998). The community of practice has a collective or social identity based upon a common area of interest with membership implying competence in an area of practice that distinguishes its members from others. Lave and Wenger also devised the concept of

*'legitimate peripheral participation'* (1991:29) to suggest that people new to communities of practice need to participate in the community's sociocultural practices in order to be fully integrated (Lave and Wenger, 1991). By focusing on the social context of learning, the relational aspects and social construction of learner identities, this perspective echoes the structural approach to symbolic interactionism (section 2.3.1). Whilst the notion of 'communities of practice' is particularly useful in this thesis in exploring the identities of work-based learners in higher education I would argue that this concept does not provide critical insights into communities regarding issues such as power relations.

The next section in this literature review examines literature relating to a specific area of transition, that of becoming a student and in particular the factors work-based learning consider in making this choice.

### **2.3.3.1 Choosing to Become a Student**

Literature exploring the transition into higher education identifies a range of factors, both personal and professional that impact upon the choices work-based learners make when undertaking the social work degree which forms the basis of the first research question (section 3.2). The idea that the process of choosing to undertake a degree can be extended and complex for mature students is explored by Davies and Williams (2001). The stages they identify are - being a non-participant; being a potential mature student; an aspirant student; and finally, an applicant (when they weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of becoming a student). Davies and Williams describe this process as 'fragile' based upon three factors:

*'the complexity of the investment, the relative newness of the identity as a learner in higher education, and the accessibility of the delivery of programmes and services' (2001:189).*

Davies and Williams suggest that for mature students the decision to enter higher education poses a significant challenge to previous identities and *'constitutes a significant fracture'* (2001:191) in the continuous process of identity formation.

Motivation to undertake a degree however, goes beyond the individual meanings people attribute to their actions and can be shaped by structural influences. Echoing a structural symbolic interactionist perspective, West argues that work-based learners like others are 'scripted' by cultural factors such as gender, ethnicity and class which influence the way people articulate their thoughts and feelings (1995). He argues that studies on motivation often draw a distinction between occupational and personal motivations which obscure the complexities of this subject. People are more likely to identify occupation as the primary motivating factor as this is a more 'respectable' driver. West argues that this reflects ideological debates regarding the role of education and is, in consequence, considered the more worthy and acceptable motivation (West, 1995). West argues that:

*'This may produce a profound tautology: students themselves mirroring, in their responses, the rationalizations for educational participation most dominant and respectable in the wider culture and in the process excluding, or even repressing, the more personal parts of the story' (1995:2).*

As a cautionary note to researchers he suggests that identifying occupation as the primary motivating factor may also reflect the power dynamics within research interviews with the participant wanting to present the 'more worthy' motivation to the researcher.

For work-based learners, participation in programmes of higher education focused on professional development is an opportunity for learners to gain qualifications by combining career aspiration with existing experience and understanding along with performance in their role (Boud and Solomon, 2001). Work-based learning also presents personal opportunities for individuals. Byrne and Flood (2005) state that students in higher education are motivated to learn intrinsically (for pleasure, interest and/or for intellectual development) or extrinsically (in order to achieve an external goal which usually results in goal orientated learning). Personal opportunities also include empowerment and emancipatory motivations. In a study of factors influencing the participation of adults in work-based learning in higher education, Edwards (2013) found that participants also recognised wider personal benefits that included increased confidence and a reappraisal of themselves as learners.

Howard and Davies (2013) suggest that incentives for entering higher education are different for mature students due to the perception of risks being higher. Mature students, they suggest, are more likely to have long term financial commitments with greater costs for leaving the labour market due to security of employment and less earning potential due to age (ibid). Watts and Waraker (2008) identify risks to established patterns of



relationships (in particular their role of nurturer within the family). They suggest that by compromising the primacy of the family, students have to give themselves 'permission' to become students (ibid). To minimise these risks, along with risk of tensions with family members, Esmond argues that students choose to study part-time (2012). Thunborg et al (2013) states that the sacrifices made by mature students to go to university result in them having high expectations of themselves.

A number of typologies of motivation for students have been proposed in a variety of studies that offer frameworks for understanding a range of motivations (Davey and Jamieson, 2003; Osborne et al, 2004; Thunborg et al, 2013). Davey and Jamieson (2003) identified three categories of motivation based upon their study in New Zealand of mature students in higher education who had been early school leavers:

**Davey and Jamieson's Categories of Motivation for Mature Students (early school leavers)**

1. *An interest in learning and an ambition to get on*
2. *Family transitions, for example children leaving home*
3. *A need for higher qualifications for their employment*

(2003:277-278)

Davey and Jamieson's categorisation does account for gender difference with men's motivations more likely to be work-based or based on family

formation whereas women, especially those over 50 years, are more likely to be influenced by transitions within families. For women family transitions may result in a re-entry into work subsequently highlighting the need for qualifications.

Thunborg et al produced a typology resulting from their study of 'non-traditional' learners in Sweden and was based on motivation being an interaction between the spontaneous 'I' and the socialised 'me' stressing the relevance of motivation to social contexts and how people are socialised.

Thunborg et al suggest motivations are, '*dynamic, changeable over time and interconnected with each other*' (2013:180).

#### **Thunborg, Bron, and Edstrom's Typology of Motivation for Non-traditional Students**

1. *Being interested in a specific subject*
2. *Changing the life course*
3. *Getting a better life and social status*
4. *Getting intellectual stimulation*
5. *Having something to do*
6. *Making a difference to others*
7. *Trying it out, seeing what it is like*

(2013:182)

Neither typologies of Thunborg et al (2013) or Davey and Jamieson (2003) comprehensively address the motivations of mature students entering higher education. Whilst Davey and Jamieson's explore the impact of gender it remains limited and the categories of Thunborg et al are too vague with neither of these typologies accounting sufficiently for the opportunity to challenge existing identities. Osborne et al in their study of mature students created six decision making categories of mature student:

**Osborne, Marks and Turner's Decision Making Categories of Mature Students**

1. *Delayed traditional*
2. *Late Starter*
3. *Single Parent*
4. *Careerist*
5. *Escapees*
6. *Personal Growers*

(2004:291)

Osborne et al (2004) suggest that a range of significant factors influence decision making at various stages including application and continuation. One such factor they identify is the potential for financial losses, a significant factor in choosing to study part-time or full-time. For students with children, financial losses also mean considering the impact of undertaking study on their families. Osborne et al also suggest a lack of academic confidence as a potential barrier to study (2004). Other factors impacting on the decision

of mature students to undertake higher education include participants' belief that they had untapped or wasted potential at the point of leaving compulsory education but did not have the opportunity to apply to higher education previously. Another reason is the belief when they were younger that higher education was 'not for them'. Osborne et al also suggest that some mature students decide to enter higher education because they see education as the way to improve their life chances and are prepared to withstand the losses that study would mean. Osborne et al suggest that women prioritise the maintenance of the status quo within the family over their responsibilities as a student which impacts upon the management of their studies (2004).

Osborne et al's categories present the possibility of layers of decision making (2004). Drawing on Osborne et al's categories (2004) Chapman suggests that students often straddled more than one category (2012-13). Whilst some students are motivated to enrol on higher education programmes to enhance their capabilities others are motivated to gain recognition of existing skills and knowledge and for workplace advancement (ibid). However, Chapman (2012-13) suggests that work-based learners can be sceptical about the learning opportunities, particularly from placements. Obtaining the qualification can also be perceived to be a validation of skills and knowledge and capacity for occupational roles involving greater responsibility (Crisp and Maidment, 2009).

The broad range of decision making categories of Osborne et al (2004) is most relevant to my study by demonstrating a range of both occupational

and personal factors in decision making although for work-based learners the category of 'careerist' needs to be more nuanced. The typology does not adequately represent the complexity of categories nor the interrelationship of categories over time that produce layers of decision making. A development of the 'careerist' category would provide further insight into the potential complex set of occupational motivations that work-based learners may anticipate by undertaking a professional programme in higher education.

This literature highlights key areas of consideration in understanding the decisions of work-based learners to undertake a programme in higher education including the barriers to participation perceived by some which is relevant in particular to the first research question in this study (section 3.2). Literature examining three domains in which participants positioned their roles and their identities (educational, occupational and domestic) will be explored in the following section focused on empirical research beginning with the subsection of 'student' and 'learner' roles and related identities.

## **2.4            EMPIRICAL RESEARCH**

The following three sub sections will explore empirical research that has focused on the three domains (educational, occupational and domestic) in which identities of work-based learners, and the roles upon which these are based, are positioned. This literature provides an understanding of key themes identified in previous studies that are relevant to all three research questions in this study (section 3.2).

### **2.4.1 Work-based learning: ‘student’ and ‘learner’ roles and identities**

The formation of a ‘student’ or ‘learner’ identity is a key issue in relation to all three research questions. ‘Learner’ and ‘student’ identities have been the subject of much debate in academic literature due to the significance attached to retention in higher education and the successful integration of students by HEIs. However, there is a danger of conflating ‘student’ and ‘learner’ and the differences are important to this study. A useful clarification is offered by Thunborg et al (2013) (section 1.4).

Solomon’s article on vocational learning is helpful in exploring the language of ‘learner’ for work-based learners. He discusses the relationship between being both a learner and a worker and the conflation of the two identities using the term ‘learner-worker’ to signify the hybrid identity (2005).

Solomon argues that the positioning of ‘learner’ first rather than ‘worker’ in the sequence indicates the location of the learner and their purpose and anticipated practices (2005). Crisp and Maidment (2009) also found that the language of ‘student’/‘learner’ is significant as work-based learners resented having to assume a ‘student’ identity perceived by them as derogatory.

Askham (2008) suggests that there is also a contradiction for mature learners in the simultaneous states of ‘adult’ and ‘student’. He suggests that:

*'the adult identity is autonomous, responsible and mature whereas that of the student identity is incomplete, dependent and in deficit'* (2008:90).

In contrast to this construct O'Shea, in her study at an Australian university of women who were 'first in the family' entering higher education, suggests there is an idealised student being presented (2014). This 'ideal' student is an independent learner who will take responsibility for themselves and is self-reliant managing the educational expectations of university (O'Shea, 2014). O'Shea argues that this type of student is a product of a neo-liberal discourse of higher education. Furthermore, this concept is problematic for many higher education students due to the subjectivities and complexities of students' lives and the diverse student population. Leathwood argues that this discourse is a male construct and assumes that students are *'unencumbered by domestic responsibilities, poverty or self-doubt'* (2006:615).

The development of a student identity has been explored in a range of literature (Collier, 2000; Warmington, 2002; Crossan et al, 2003; Johnston and Merrill, 2004; Yelder, 2004; Chapman, 2012-13 McSweeney, 2012; Daniels and Brooker, 2014; O'Shea, 2014). Drawing on a structural symbolic interactionist perspective of identity McSweeney argued that success in higher education was dependent upon the formation of a *'viable student or learner identity'* (2012:366). In her study of social care practitioners and work-based learning in Ireland, she found that the development of a 'viable student identity' necessitated students to adapt to the requirements of a new role and 'successfully' accommodate the new

identity (McSweeney, 2012). This has been portrayed in some literature (Collier, 2000; Daniels and Brooker, 2014) as a linear process. According to Daniels and Brooker developing a student identity occurs over time as the student enters and moves through the stages of university:

*'Student identity emerges through this developmental journey: firstly as a 'new' student, then by moving into and through new spaces of learning and sharing knowledge, critiquing and reflecting on new and unfamiliar ideas' (2014:69).*

This suggests a trajectory of development occurring over time echoing the concept of 'transition as development' (Gale and Parker, 2014) (section 2.3.1). This linear development however, does not reflect the complexity of accommodating multiple identities spanning multiple domains.

The impact on learner identities of prior experiences of education and biography has been addressed in other literature (Collier, 2000; Warmington, 2002; Crossan et al, 2003; Johnston and Merrill, 2004; Yelder, 2004; Ahlgren and Tett, 2010; Chapman, 2012-13). For many 'non-traditional' learners re-entering education means *'returning to a site with past associations of marginalisation and truncated progress'* (Warmington, 2002:584). O'Shea suggests that for 'non-traditional' students (mature students and 'first in family' students) the higher education environment is incompatible with existing identities and can sometimes be contradictory to the social contexts within which previous identities have been constructed (2014). O'Shea suggests that these contradictions can result in a fundamental questioning of identity. Echoing a structural approach to



symbolic interactionism Collier argues that students use their learner identity from previous education experiences and when this fails to match the new expectations they attempt to readjust this to achieve a better match (2000). Becoming accomplished in the recognised and valued tasks associated with the student role is central to achieving a better match and developing a 'viable' student identity (Watts and Waraker, 2008; McSweeney, 2012).

When a student has a lack of cultural capital (section 2.3.2) or the 'wrong' cultural capital (Beagan, 2007) coming to university can be experienced as a dislocation or '*imposter phenomenon*' (Clance and Imes, 1978:241).

'Imposter phenomenon' was termed by Clance and Imes and describes a state of vulnerability regarding learner identities that can be experienced by participants in all learning environments. Borrowing from Clance and Imes' study (1978), Chapman's study of mature students found that all students to varying degrees suffered feelings of being an imposter in higher education, describing this as '*imposter syndrome*' (2012-13:48). This she stated '*can lead to, at best, a feeling of lack of entitlement but at worst a fear of exposure*' (2012-13:48). O'Shea found in her study that women who were first-in-family students who were undertaking degrees following a period of absence from education were at higher risk of seeing themselves as imposters in higher education (2014). Whilst work-based learning routes offer a legitimate route into higher education that might not be accessible otherwise, at the same time this can enhance the vulnerabilities of those students classed as 'non-traditional' learners.

A number of studies consider the relationship between social class, the construction of an identity as a learner and perceived alienation from university culture (Bowl, 2001; Reay et al 2010; Howard and Davies, 2013; Thunborg, 2013). Reay et al (2010) consider the concept of alienation and identifies the difference between universities in terms of the social class of students who enrol on programmes. They suggest that students' experiences of adapting to the higher education environment and developing a stronger identity as a learner were dependent upon a range of factors including gender, location, university resourcing, and other competing commitments (2010). The complex relationships between these factors meant that on some levels some students can feel more integrated into higher education than on others, impacting on the salience of a student identity (Reay et al, 2010). One student in their study for example felt they 'fitted in' socially but not academically (ibid). Howard and Davies (2013) suggest that people can construct a 'non-learner' identity which creates a barrier to integration into the student community. There are also cognitive risks associated with this due to feeling that they have a deficit in terms of the necessary academic attributes (ibid). However, the context of higher education does contribute to the formation of an 'authentic' student identity (Esmond, 2012).

Much of the literature focuses on individual identity of students. Howard and Davies (2013) however, identified a shared social identity amongst a student group as one of the themes to emerge from their study of mature students on two higher education programmes. The social identity was based upon '*background, goals and challenges*' (Howard and Davies,

2013:780). Group membership was described as 'critical' as the construction of a social identity formed the basis of a support network enabling students to overcome the challenges of higher education (Howard and Davies, 2013). Work-based learners in this study highlighted group membership as an important factor in their experiences of higher education suggesting the formation of 'learning communities' (Lave and Wenger, 1991) (section 2.3.3).

Whilst an identity as a learner may initially be fragile this is also liable to change as the student becomes more embedded in the '*routines and rituals*' (Martin et al, 2014:204) of higher education. Context and commitment to roles (Stryker, 2008) become important issues and are helpful in understanding the challenges experienced by work-based learners in this study straddling multiple domains with multiple identities resulting from these.

#### **2.4.2 Work-based Learning: Occupational Roles and Identities**

The multiple roles and associated identities of work-based learners, including those based within the workplace, is a key area of focus for this study impacting on all three research questions. For work-based learners conflict can occur when entering higher education between an already established and valued identity based upon their work role and establishing a new identity as a learner and/or student.

Martin et al found that the worker identity was likely to withstand the competition of a student identity and therefore liable to result in further isolation from their peer group (2014). Askham similarly argued that for mature work-based learners conflict can occur between their existing work-based identity and the formation of a new 'student' identity due to occupying two spheres (2008). The role of student can impact on this with Moss and Pittaway (2013) finding in their study that this was particularly the case for online students who did not appear to be constructing a typical student identity but continued to maintain their previous work related identity (section 2.4.2). A further challenge in terms of identity for work-based learners is that a 'state of learning' could signal to colleagues a deficiency of knowledge (Askam, 2008). Entering into higher education can therefore mean leaving a place where you feel comfortable and where you have established a credible identity, to one that is threatening (Martin et al, 2012). Martin et al (2012) argue that becoming a student requires someone to undergo a transition '*to leave the comfort and safety of what they know in order to enter an environment which emphasises that they do not yet know enough*' (2012:202).

Tensions and conflict between occupational and educational roles and their corresponding identities can occur when work-based learners are exposed to new ways of thinking about their practice. Bamber and Tett found, in their study of non-traditional learners in Scotland, that professional education can challenge existing beliefs requiring a re-evaluation of work practices (2012). This can lead to a separation rather than integration of 'worker' and 'student' identities in order to protect the identity of a worker. McSweeney argues

that integration of identities is aided by the use of reflection and the use of practice related materials enabling work-based learners to establish links between theory and practice (2012).

The relationship between theory and practice is a long established debate within social work. Social workers can feel vulnerable about their claims to knowledge with credentials providing validation of knowledge and legitimising claims to professional identity (Beddoe, 2011). Beddoe's study of health social workers in New Zealand (2011) found that in multi-disciplinary settings this enables social workers to lay '*claim to a distinctive space*' (Beddoe, 2011:33) and symbolic capital which contributes to professional recognition and identity. Watts and Waraker (2008) similarly found in their study of a work-based learning programme for nurses in England that a 'qualifications premium' exists 'privileging the qualified voice' (2008:106). However, for unqualified workers this emphasis on knowledge claims can undermine their experiential understanding of the practice context and polarises the workforce. For work-based learners Watts and Waraker suggest that this emphasises a '*juxtaposition of two rival versions of competence*' (2008:108), with 'operational competence' based on the workplace versus 'academic competence' based on knowledge. Bridging these positions is an area of interest for both students and the providers of social work education.

Professional programmes are not only about imparting a body of discipline specific knowledge and a licence to enter a profession but also about its participants acquiring a sense of belonging to a profession, a 'professional

identity' (Solomon, 2005). Bogo et al argue that a commitment to 'a *common core of agreed-on beliefs, values and interests*' (1993:279) constitutes a professional identity which for social workers includes the traditional values of social justice, empowerment and tackling social disadvantage (HCPC, 2012). Osteen (2013) found that students on social work programmes were drawn to the profession due to a perceived congruence between the values of the social work profession and their own values. In his study, students felt that the continued focus on values and beliefs was significant in terms of personal and professional development (2013). Day et al suggests that this congruence between the 'professional self' and 'personal self' is important in confirming a sense of belonging to a profession and an integrated professional identity (2006). Laying claim to a professional identity however, involves a further transition. Osteen's study found that it was only on completion of their degree that students felt able to assume their professional identity (2013). At this point, Osteen (2013) argues, they moved from peripheral participation to full participation of the community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) (section 2.3.3).

The structural symbolic interactionist approach proposes that identities are relational and contextual. The impact of others within the workplace on student identities is therefore an important area of consideration. Watts and Waraker found that for work-based learners their student identity was often not recognised by colleagues (2008). This resulted in students being despondent about the lack of recognition afforded their additional role and feeling like *being* a student was confined to their study days (ibid). Lack of recognition can result in a failure by employers to accommodate the

additional student workload resulting in unreasonable expectations of workloads (Crisp and Maidment, 2009). Consequently, the student identity of work-based learners may only be allowed to emerge within study orientated contexts although this time is also often compromised. Watts and Waraker go on to argue that failing to reinforce the student status compromises student identity and when student identity fails to transcend other contexts, learning opportunities become limited (2008).

The support of employers is therefore seen as key to work-based learners accommodating a student identity. However, the way in which support is manifested is critical. Sobiechowska and Maisch (2007) found, in their study of work-based post qualifying curriculum for social workers, that despite having generally supportive employers there was a recognised work-based culture amongst the social workers that assumed the prioritisation of workload responsibilities. This resulted in an inability to make use of their study time and engage in their studies. Sobiechowska and Maisch (2007) also found that formalised learning from practice was highly valued as it built upon areas of understanding that learners were familiar with and not classed as new knowledge. Whilst building on existing understanding is a recognised pedagogical strategy, data from this study would suggest that new learning was also an important aspect in strengthening student identity.

The vulnerability of work-based learners has also been identified in the literature (Boud and Solomon, 2001; Watts and Waraker, 2008; Crisp and Maidment, 2009; Chapman, 2012-13). Work-based learners often perceive

their student identity within their work place to be on public view with sponsored students reporting feeling an increased pressure to succeed (Watts and Waraker, 2008). The progression, and potential failure for students, was therefore more exposed, increasing the risks to work-based identities (Boud and Solomon, 2001; Watts and Waraker, 2008; Crisp and Maidment, 2009; Chapman, 2012-13).

Beyond the issues arising in the workplace, the model of adult participation in education developed by Gorard and Rees (2002) identifies social determinants impacting upon participation including family background, gender, age, time and place. They suggest that employment factors are secondary determinants and recognise the importance for work-based learners of understanding both the learner and their context rather than disengaging the two. This leads to a discussion of the impact of family on the identities of work-based learners.

### **2.4.3 Work-based Learning: Domestic Roles and Identities**

A number of studies have explored how entering higher education impacts upon family and domestic lives of students. Byrne and Flood (2005) found that students expected their study to fit into and around their lives with little disruption to other parts. Other studies found that higher education was perceived to be disruptive in the lives of students', resulting in time poverty being a cause of stress (Baxter and Britton, 2001; Watts and Waraker, 2008; Heyler, 2011; Butston, 2016). Watts and Waraker describe the



desire to minimise disruption to domestic and family roles and relationships as '*the need to maintain homeostasis*' (2008:107). Furthermore, the 'pull' of these other identities can compete with and impede the formation of a student identity (Esmond, 2012; Martin et al, 2014). Identity confusion and role conflict can arise when there is lack of recognition about changing roles within existing relationships leading to destabilisation. The negotiation of new relationships and renegotiation of existing ones requires accommodation, adaptation and assimilation which Watts and Waraker argue is time consuming (2008).

Co-existing in both domestic and academic spheres creates particular challenges for women students as well as opportunities. In his discussion of gender Beck cites entry into the education system as an example of how institutional patterns affect other elements of biography (1992). In contrast to men, Beck argued that women lead a 'double life' that is contradictory and shaped both by families as well as organisations (ibid). Beck suggests that for women in education the '*family rhythm still applies*' (1992:132) alongside education and work resulting in competing demands that remain incompatible. Other studies (Baxter and Britton, 2001; Lillis, 2001; Cooper and Pickering, 2008; O'Shea, 2014) also found that straddling dual domains for women is problematic. O'Shea suggests that women's lives are characterised by complex and chaotic ways to manage time and fulfil obligations and resulting in feelings of guilt for mothers (2014). Baxter and Britton (2001) also found that the accounts of mature women students in their study are pre-occupied with the challenges of managing both domestic and study commitments. A further obstacle was the resistance from male

partners when women decided to enter higher education (O'Shea, 2014). For women tension between study and domestic commitments results in what Lillis describes as 'hidden learners'. Lillis states that:

*'the symbolic significance of their studying, at times when such study is invisible to the rest of the household, is not to be underestimated. Using 'spare' domestic time is a way of bringing the domain of study/HE into the domain of home, 'through the back door', in order to avoid tensions in the household'* (Lillis, 2001:112).

This is echoed in the work of Warin and Dempster whose study of men on undergraduate courses in England, found a dissonance between 'hidden' and 'public' aspects of identity (2007). By drawing on the concept of salience they suggest further complexities to the multiplicity of identity. The notion of a fluid identity is helpful in understanding how students manage competing demands by negotiating and renegotiating roles and corresponding identities across and within contexts and over time navigating boundaries. Research by Cooper and Pickering (2008) identifies the transitions that work-based learners on social work programmes have to manage and the impact that family and caring responsibilities have on the quality of the learning experience. Often, they found there were 'trade-offs' in terms of managing their studies, involving an assessment of when was the right time to commit to a programme of study.

Contradictions in identity for women were found in other studies (Haynes, 2006; Reay, 2003). Guilt as an accompaniment of study was a finding of Reay's study of women attending an Access course (2003). She found that

in order to overcome the guilt of studying women justified their participation in terms of '*doing it for my family*' (2003:309) and being a good parent by acting as a positive role model and thereby helping their children educationally. Reay goes on to argue that this rationale enables women to '*occupy the acceptable space of authentic femininity*' (2003:309).

Whilst the challenges for women students are evident, some studies (Baxter and Britton, 2001; O'Shea, 2014) also found that higher education offered women opportunities to find fulfilment that were otherwise missing. O'Shea described this as an opportunity to '*legitimate the self within wider social spheres*' (2014:154), a chance to redefine their sense of self and expand horizons beyond the domestic domain. Baxter and Britton suggest that education as empowerment has been presented as:

*'helping students to break out of domesticity; increasing opportunities for paid work; gaining independence from traditional family structures; providing opportunities for forging new domestic roles and identities; or providing a route to independence following family breakdown'* (2001:87-88).

Empowerment however, is not without risks. In Hird's study some women categorised as working class found that in the process of aspiring to gain qualifications that provided an opportunity to 'leave' their working class culture, they struggled to maintain acceptance from family and friends (1998).

Family roles become a lens through which gender can be explored and understood as an axis of difference regarding identity. Hird argues that individual identity should be understood within a framework of a *'fragmented subject who structures, and is structured by, wider patterns of diversity and power'* (1998:519). At points of transition, such as entering higher education gender is highly significant due to it being a salient aspect of identity (Warin and Dempster, 2007; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Gender is described by Warin and Dempster as:

*'a central element of the story, an organising principle within the processes of subject positioning that occur on entry to new sociocultural contexts, and the formation of new social relationships'* (2007:888).

Women are themselves not a homogenous group and O'Shea's study (2014) highlights some of the differences between groups including structural issues. For older women in O'Shea's study, structural issues such as employment and giving up work had economic implications whilst emotional issues and time poverty due to managing both family and study also presented obstacles (Edwards, 1993; Bowl, 2001; Tones et al, 2009; O'Shea 2014). The combination of class and gender, for some women, creates self-doubt and questioning about the suitability of higher education for them (O'Shea, 2014). Baxter and Britton argue that in their study women *'find themselves struggling to find their identities whilst buffeted by class and gender forces which at times threaten to overwhelm them'* (2001:101). By maintaining a focus on individual diversity Hird (1998) suggests that we acknowledge how people may experience the same event

differently and recognise how memberships of different 'groups' can produce contradictions in identity. The focus of this thesis is to make visible these contradictions as well as the commonalities.

## **2.5 CONCLUSION**

This chapter has drawn together three bodies of literature (policy discussions, theory and empirical research) that are directly relevant to this thesis and the research questions (section 3.2). The review of the literature explores a broad range of issues in relation to work-based learners' experiences of higher education with particular reference to social work education. Some literature offers an understanding of political and ideological debates in higher education including values of social justice and widening participation policies. The literature also explores the position of work-based learning provision and the development of this in response to the expansion of higher education and economic imperatives.

The examination of the broad range of literature in relation to identity along with the concepts of multiplicity, salience and transition is particularly useful in establishing the theoretical parameters in this thesis. I have focused in particular on contributions from the discipline of sociological social psychology in relation to identity in order to establish an understanding of the dynamic relationship between individual experience and social structures. I have explored the empirical research that focuses on three domains for identity construction – educational, occupational and domestic

– that make visible the multiplicity of identity. These studies highlight conflicts and tensions as well as some of the opportunities for work-based learners in the complex processes of *becoming* and *being* students in higher education. This literature will inform the findings in the three data chapters and discussion chapter.

# CHAPTER THREE

## **METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN**

### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

Chapter three sets out the main methodological approach underpinning the study on which this thesis is based, narrative inquiry, and outlines how this approach has been applied to explore the research questions. The chapter begins by listing the research questions in 3.2. followed by a discussion in section 3.3 of the underlying epistemology of narrative inquiry and key connections with two other research traditions that informed the study, critical social research and feminist research. The importance attached to narrative inquiry as a methodology of data collection, specifically for eliciting narratives of experience, is underlined. The methodology and principles of undertaking qualitative research in relation to this study are also examined in this section followed by a discussion of the importance of rigour, transparency, multivocality and credibility to legitimise the research approach adopted. The research design is explored in section 3.4 including details of the two HEI programmes, the selection of participants for the

study and a discussion of the data collection methods. Section 3.5 critically examines the transcription processes followed in section 3.6 by a discussion of Braun and Clarke's (2006) method of thematic analysis applied to the data. The ethical considerations of this study are scrutinised in section 3.7 including consent, confidentiality and information sharing. This is followed by an exploration of the researcher/participant relationship in section 3.8 and in section 3.9 the centrality of researcher reflexivity to the research process is discussed. The chapter concludes with an overview of key factors shaping this study.

## **3.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The focus of this study was borne out of my personal and professional interests in student experiences of social work education. It was also influenced by a hypothesis that work-based learning routes make higher education more accessible to some unqualified practitioners and thereby widen participation in higher education. The research questions have therefore sought to explore the experiences of a historically marginalised group in UK higher education, students following work-based learning routes. A second hypothesis is that being a work-based learner undertaking a professional qualification involves complex negotiations between multiple roles and the identities upon which these are based (Ethier and Deaux, 1994; Stryker, 1987, 2008; Stryker and Burke, 2000; Simon, 2004; Adams et al, 2006; Warin and Dempster, 2007). In formulating the research questions my aim was to contribute to the understanding of how work-based



learners on social work degrees manage the transition from unqualified to qualified social work practitioners and to explore their experiences of the challenges and opportunities this presented to them. The overarching research question was:

*‘What are the social, occupational and educational experiences of work-based learners undertaking a social work degree?’*

This overarching question was divided into three research questions formulated to reflect the trajectory of work-based learners’ experiences of higher education as they move from unqualified to qualified practitioners. I was interested in the transitions that students experience as a result of participating in higher education and how moving between contexts, such as family and occupational contexts, impacted upon their experiences as students. Based on these factors the research questions that underpinned my study were:

1. What factors influence students’ decisions to undertake the social work degree via work-based learning routes?

- *Were the factors identified by participants personal, occupational and/or educational and how did these contribute to this decision?*

2. How do students experience the educational journey?

- *What did becoming a student mean to participants?*
- *What did being a student mean to participants?*

3. What personal and social challenges and opportunities do students identify whilst undertaking work-based learning routes in social work education?

- *What meanings did students attribute to their positions within multiple domains – personal, educational and occupational?*
- *What meanings did students attribute to the challenges and/or opportunities?*

The research questions were formulated as exploratory questions with the sub questions added as the research focus narrowed during initial phases of the analysis. Research question one focused upon why participants choose to undertake the degree and I was interested in exploring the complex nature of this decision including personal, educational and occupational factors. Research question two aimed to explore the transitions participants experienced when entering higher education and what factors impacted upon the educational journey of work-based learners. Research question three aimed to broaden the focus on how participants experienced their journey into and through higher education identifying the challenges and opportunities across multiple domains such as educational, occupational and domestic.

### **3.3 THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The overarching research approach adopted in this study can most usefully be described as 'qualitative'. Whilst there are ongoing debates about the

specific meanings attached to 'qualitative' research, and the validity of drawing core distinctions between qualitative and quantitative research (Kelly et al, 1992; Jayaratne and Stewart, 1995), the methodology in this study has adopted the following key principles of qualitative research:

- It seeks to explore a social phenomenon in its natural setting
- It adopts an interpretative approach
- It recognises the need for researcher reflexivity
- It seeks meanings people apply to phenomena
- The use of empirical data from a range of methods such as interviews, focus groups, case studies

(Denzin and Lincoln, 2011)

The specific qualitative research approach adopted for carrying out the study on which this thesis is based is that of narrative inquiry. The ontology of narrative inquiry is that human experience is fundamentally a storied phenomenon (Somers, 1994; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; May, 2004; Elliott, 2005; Phoenix and Sparkes, 2008; Riessman, 2008; Andrews et al, 2013) that is, that people make sense of their world through stories, by listening to, telling and repeating stories (which may be constantly modified or reiterated over time). Ewick and Silby emphasise the importance of stories in human existence:

*'stories people tell about themselves and their lives both constitute and interpret those lives; the stories describe the world as it is lived and understood by the storyteller' (1995:198).*

The epistemology of narrative inquiry thus claims a specific significance for ‘storying’ as a phenomenon to be explored in order in order to understand the meanings that people attach to experience (Somers, 1994; Gubrium and Holstein, 1998; Elliott, 2005; Riessman, 2008; Spector-Mersel, 2010; Andrews et al, 2013). Within this ‘storying approach’ personal narratives are important for individuals as they tell people about their past lives in order to make sense of the present thereby creating a coherence (Watson, 2009) which the researcher is seeking to understand. A narrative can be characterised by particular features including a sequence of events that are connected in a meaningful way to provide insights into people’s experiences of the world (Hinchman and Hinchman, 1997). Haynes (2006) emphasises in particular the temporal quality of narratives arguing that our current identity connects who we are now with who we were in the past:

*‘Who we are emerges from the past, but the future also determines the past, as it enables understanding of our past selves. The future affects how we read and understand our narratives on the past’*  
(2006:414).

The methodological implications of assuming narrative to be central to human existence and experience are that researchers should pay close attention to eliciting and analysing the stories that people tell. In this study, the methodological tools for eliciting narratives, interviews and focus group discussions, provided opportunities for participants to share with the researcher, and weave together, the separate yet interrelated dimensions of their lives - work, family, study. Insights into the complexity of experiences for work-based learners were thereby created (sections 4.6, 5.6 and 6.4).

This methodological approach assumes that it is through the process of eliciting narratives and analysing them, thus allowing for ‘a *closer examination of the realities of lived experience*’ (Torres et al, 2009:589), that meanings attached to individual experience can be understood. Such meanings are not separate from the social and cultural context within which they are nested. For researchers interested in how social structures impact upon individual experience, Biesta et al (2005) suggest that the positioning of stories within socio-political contexts and processes offers new ways of understanding them (in Bathmaker, 2010). May suggests people construct narratives to:

*‘create coherence to the image of the self, and situate themselves in relation to dominant public or cultural narratives’* (2004:171).

The notion of ‘public narrative’ mentioned by May is discussed in section 3.6. The key point to note here is that in this methodological approach of seeking to explore the meanings that individuals make of their experience, attention is also paid to the connections that can be made between individual narratives and the social and cultural context within which they are located. As such ‘public narrative’ echoes a central tenet of structural symbolic interactionism, that social structures influence behaviours, as the overarching theoretical approach adopted in this thesis (section 2.3.1).

A key strand of work using narrative inquiry foregrounds the importance of making visible narratives of human existence that are often marginalised. For example, Ewick and Silbey argue that ‘*narratives have the capacity to reveal truths about the social world that are flattened or silenced by an*

*insistence on more traditional methods'* (1995:199). It is the narratives from marginalised sections of society that can provide the most compelling evidence of oppression within society (Elliott, 2005). Narrative inquiry therefore can reflect the value of social justice '*allowing the silenced to speak*' (Ewick and Silbey, 1995:199) a value that underpins this study.

Attention to the narratives of marginalised or less socially powerful groups is a key imperative in two important approaches to research which have also shaped this thesis: critical social research and feminist research. Critical social research has its theoretical perspective rooted in the writings of the Frankfurt School including Fromm (1964), Horkheimer and Adorno (1972) and Habermas (1987) (in Crotty, 1998). This tradition is premised on the concept that power relations are constructed historically, allowing privileges for certain groups whilst others are oppressed (Henn et al, 2009). The aim is to expose social injustice through clearer understandings and lay the foundations for emancipation, empowerment and change. In order to challenge the structuring of knowledge in this way, critical social research seeks to explore practices and structures based upon oppressive social relationships in a process of deconstruction and critical analysis thereby providing alternative understandings (Harvey, 1990). The final chapter of this thesis explores how social structures such as education and work and social relations such as gender create particular challenges as well as opportunities for students seeking to participate in work based learning routes.

Feminist research theory and methodology have also been important in the development of my methodological approach (Oakley, 1981; Stanley and Wise, 1993; Kelly et al 1995; Maynard, 1995; Dominelli, 2002).

Epistemologically feminist researchers have much in common with the tradition of narrative inquiry in their endeavour to make visible the lives of those who have been marginalised – particularly women - and have argued that it is research focusing on the experiences and subjective meanings ascribed by participants that is of greatest import (Oakley, 1981; Stanley and Wise 1993; Maynard, 1995). It is through the process of revealing experiences and analysing them that the researcher is able to place these within their social and cultural context and explore the impact on individuals. Christianakis suggests that researchers should challenge research that '*silences inside voices and privileges outside voices*' (2008:112). This thesis emphasises the significance of work-based learners' experiences in higher education, a group often classified as 'non-traditional' learners (section 2.2.1), making their experiences visible in the data chapters and discussing the findings based upon these experiences in chapter seven.

### **3.3.1 Rigour and Transparency of the Study**

Rigour and transparency are key principles in validating qualitative research. Rigour and transparency require strategies that enhance the credibility of the findings including:

- Accounting for personal bias that may influence findings
- A clear audit trail of decision making
- Critical reflection of data collection methods and data analysis

- Inviting comments from participants on transcripts and analysis
- Using thick descriptions of participants experiences to support findings
- Multivocality (multiple and varied voices)

(Adapted from Noble and Smith, 2015)

I was aware in this study that rigour and transparency could be impacted upon by my role as a lecturer/tutor within the two HEIs in this study given my position as an institutional insider, a teacher and assessor. This was partly addressed by me emphasising to participants my role as a researcher when conducting the focus groups and interviews and by building a researcher-participant relationship in which I stressed that there would be no harmful consequences such as a negative impact on their grades by sharing their experiences with me (Finch, 1993; Henn et al, 2009) (section 3.8).

Adopting a reflexive approach to my positioning within the study is another way in which I have sought to be both rigorous and transparent. I adopted a robust and reflexive approach to the data analysis (section 3.10) adhering to an analytical method of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) that makes visible the decision-making processes (section 3.6). Maynard suggests that research:

*‘needs to be rigorous if it is to be regarded as intellectually compelling, politically persuasive, policy-relevant and meaningful ... At the very least this call for rigour involves being clear about one’s theoretical assumptions, the nature of the research process, the*



*criteria against which 'good' knowledge can be judged and the strategies used for interpretation and analysis' (1995:24-25).*

I have given careful consideration to the processes of decision making with my use of thematic analysis, the identification of themes and the selection of extracts making the rigour of the research transparent in my thesis (section 3.6). This has included a discussion of the theoretical assumptions and the research process along with a discussion about the strategies for analysis and interpretation (section 3.6). In addition to this discussion I have provided an evaluation of the methodology in section 7.5.

### **3.4 RESEARCH DESIGN**

In order to explore the experiences of work based learners embarking on a social work degree I designed a two stage study involving two social work degree programmes at two higher education institutions. The study included 20 participants, who took part in focus groups (section 3.4.3.2) and individual interviews (including first and second interviews) (section 3.4.3.3).

#### **3.4.1 Programme Sites**

This was a small-scale study focusing on students living in the North East of England and Cumbria and the two work-based learning social work degrees recruiting in this area at the start of this study in 2009: these were based in two universities, one at a local face-to-face university and one at a national distance learning university (referred to as such to maintain anonymity).

The two work-based learning routes on social work degrees from which

participants were recruited were both qualifying programmes delivered by HEIs with established provision in the North East of England.

### **A National Distance Learning University - BA (Hons) Social Work**

All 12 participants from this programme completed their degree within three to five years. However, there is no single defined route on this programme with students choosing to undertake either a full-time or part-time route with the possibility of changing this during the programme. The programme has a blended learning delivery - a combination of distance learning (with the majority of teaching materials being delivered on line and/or in print) and attendance at some workshops/tutorials for particular modules. The group membership of the practice learning modules is fixed but depending on the choice of other modules, and when these are undertaken, participants might attend workshops with different groups of students.

### **A Local Face-to-Face University - BSc (Hons) Social Work**

This is a campus based programme and all of the graduates in my study completed it within three years. Year one is part-time with students entering year two as full-time students. During year one of the degree students are part of a fixed group of work-based learners. Entry into year two means combining with a much larger group of full-time students creating a blend of school leavers and mature students.

Both work-based routes above provided access to a professionally qualifying programme in the region thereby meeting a range of needs. For local employers who support social care employees in undertaking social

work programmes, their needs are met in part because the format of the programme and academic year means students' attendance is limited allowing them to continue to fulfil some of the requirements of their posts. Furthermore, when employees return to work as qualified social workers they come with previous organisational and situational experience and can 'hit the ground running' (Harris et al, 2008). This type of route also meets the needs of social work programmes and the professional body's requirement for placement experience which can be resourced by employers providing placements in students' place of work or in alternative sites. From my experience as a social work lecturer, programmes also benefit from the practice experience of work-based learners which can enhance the learning experience of other students (section 5.5). Work-based learning routes can also meet the needs of the students themselves providing security of tenure as well as access to financial support for fees and maintaining a salary. This enables students to continue to meet other commitments including financial and/or familial whilst undertaking higher education leading to a qualification within their chosen careers (section 4.5).

The social work degree at the national distance learning university requires all students to be sponsored by their social work/social care employers when they enrol on the social work programme. It is possible to delay this enrolment until level two by completing level one as an 'open route' with fees being paid by the individual or the employer. Some employers are now opting to support students on the open route and subsequently deciding whether to second students on to the social work programme at level two. Some participants on the distance learning route are unable to secure

support from their employers so opt to pay for themselves on level one of this route with the hope that they are able to secure support by the time they enter level two. For others, the open route enables them to demonstrate commitment to the programme subsequently improving negotiating powers with employers for secondment at a later date.

On the work-based learning route at the local face-to-face university students can either be seconded by employers, which generally involves having all fees paid and a proportion of their salary as above, or negotiate different arrangements. This usually means allowing students the time to attend university and maintain their salary but with students paying the course fees themselves thus not committing to working for the organisation beyond graduation. A further impact on students of the secondment arrangements is that they are required to make a commitment to work for the seconding agency of at least two years following completion of the degree. Also, organisations usually have some control over where the student undertakes his/her placement and this often results in one of the substantial placements being undertaken with their employer thereby easing the transition back to work following graduation.

Recent financial cuts by social work organisations have meant that employers and employees are finding more creative ways of defining 'support' to enable staff to undertake qualifying programmes. For the participants in this study this involved various types of support from their employer ranging from financial support to allocation of study time and securing practice learning opportunities. It also meant either part-time

and/or full-time attendance which could vary at different stages of their degree. The participants in this study varied in the amount of time they took, or intended to take, to complete the degree via these flexible routes ranging from three to five years.

Confining the research to the North East and Cumbria may have limited the scope of this research and presented a focus on a particular region that is characterised by socio economic disadvantage (Office of National Statistics, 2012). The benefits of a regional focus were that I had worked on both the programmes. I was aware that both of the HEIs had established relationships with local employers with a long tradition of providing work-based learning routes in social work education spanning several decades for the local face-to-face university and over ten years for the national distance learning university. I negotiated access to students through the required ethics procedures for the individual universities.

### **3.4.2 Participants**

There were 20 participants in this study, 12 from the national distance learning university and eight from the local face-to-face university. The geographical scope of this research initially included people living within the North East of England and Cumbria within the following postcodes, CA, TS, SR, NE, DH the limits of which meant that I was confident that I could manage the travel requirements. I had initially anticipated that the use of these postcodes would facilitate recruitment. However, this was later extended, with the agreement of my supervisors, to include the postcode 'DL' to give the potential to attract further participants specifically from year

one of the programme at the national distance learning university, none of whom had responded to the initial invitation. This however, only resulted in one further graduate responding. When I still had no participants from year one of the national distance learning university programme it was agreed to send a further invitation to the new 2013 cohort of year one students to which one student responded positively. Recruitment from the other levels of the national distance learning programme was unproblematic.

Initial contact with participants was made with letters of invitation from my PhD lead supervisor, Dr Lucy Rai (now Dr Lucy Gray) (Appendix One). This third party approach distanced me from the recruitment of participants intending to enable students to feel more confident in declining to take part. The letter of invitation was accompanied by a consent form (Appendix Two), a participant information sheet including third party contact details for their respective universities (Appendix Three), an outline of the supervision I received as a researcher (Appendix Four) and a participant information questionnaire (Appendix Six). The invitation process was extended to four stages due to lack of representation initially from year one of the national distance learning programme previously outlined. The stages that participants elected to join the study are outlined in Figure 2.

I recruited the participants from cohorts beginning the programmes between 2006 and 2013. The size of these cohorts in both universities was relatively small, ranging from 8 to 17 students, totalling 115 students who were invited to participate. From this range of cohorts, I was able to recruit participants from each stage of progression through the social work programme from

those who had just begun a degree to those who had graduated (Figure 3).

Through the selection of participants across the three years/levels of both programmes as well as graduates, this thesis reflects various stages of participation in higher education which combine into a trajectory of student experience (Figure 3).

**Figure 2: Stages Participants Elected to Participate in Research**

<i>Invitation Stage</i>	<i>Number of Participants from Social Work Programmes</i>	
	<i>The National distance learning university</i>	<i>The Local university</i>
First letter (March 2012)	9	8
Second letter (April 2012)	1	
Third letter extending post code (June 2012)	1	
Fourth letter to Year 1 of national distance learning degree only (February 2013)	1	

**Figure 3: Participants Across Years/Levels of Study**

<i>Year/level</i>	<i>Local Face-to-face University</i>		<i>National Distance Learning University</i>	
	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>
<b>1</b>	Diane	Keith	Sally	
<b>2</b>	Morag Sonia	Brian	Anna	Carl
<b>3</b>	Hilary		Mary Lois Valerie Rebecca Laura	Donny
<b>Graduates</b>	Holly Lillian		Hannah Petra	Ivor
<b>Total (by gender)</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Total students</b>	<b>8</b>		<b>12</b>	

To maintain confidentiality gender specific pseudonyms have been given.

Of the 115 students contacted 26 people in total responded (response rate of 22.6%) and 25 returned consent forms, one of whom withdrew shortly afterwards due to pressures of work. Of the 24 initial respondents 23 completed the participant information questionnaire (Appendix Six). This questionnaire invited the respondents to indicate if they would be willing to participate in a focus group and/or interviews. Four of the 24 respondents did not continue to participate in the research after the participant information questionnaire. Three of the remaining 20 participants stated that they did not want to participate in a focus group (section 3.4.3.2) but were willing to participate in individual interviews (section 3.4.3.3) meaning that 17 people elected to participate in a focus group. This response rate was within the intended scope of the research and I did not therefore need to make a selection. The following tables produce a breakdown of the 20 participants according to gender (Figure 4), age (Figure 5) and participants with or without previous degrees (Figure 6) on each programme.

**Figure 4: Participant Statistics: Gender**

<b><i>Social Work Programme</i></b>	<b><i>Gender</i></b>		<b><i>Total per programme</i></b>
	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>	
National distance learning university	3	9	12
Local face-to-face university	2	6	8
<b>Total number of participants</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>20</b>



**Figure 5: Participant Statistics: Age**

<i><b>Social Work Programme</b></i>	<i><b>Known Ages</b></i>				<i><b>Total per programme</b></i>
	<b>20-30</b>	<b>30-39</b>	<b>40-49</b>	<b>50+</b>	
National distance learning university	0	7	2	2	11
Local face-to-face university	0	3	4	1	8
<b>Total number of participants</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>19*</b>

\* The age of one of the national distance learning university participant's is not known.

**Figure 6: Participants with and without previous first degrees**

<i><b>Social Work Programme</b></i>	<i><b>Without Degrees</b></i>		<i><b>With Degrees</b></i>		<b>Number of total Participants</b>
	<b>Women</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>Men</b>	
National distance learning university	6 (30%)	1 (5%)	3 (15%)	2 (10%)	<b>12 (60%)</b>
Local face-to-face university	5 (25%)	2 (10%)	1 (5%)	0 (0%)	<b>8 (40%)</b>
<b>Total number of participants per category</b>	<b>11 (55%)</b>	<b>3 (15%)</b>	<b>4 (20%)</b>	<b>2 (10%)</b>	<b>20 (100%)</b>
<b>Total number with/without degrees</b>	<b>14 (70%)</b>		<b>6 (30%)</b>		<b>20 (100%)</b>

Percentages indicate the proportion of participants in each category.

Statistics for England suggest that the proportion of men in my study was slightly higher than for social work overall. National figures in 2011-12 (the same time I recruited the participants) indicate that 17% of social work students were men and 83% were women (Skills for Care, 2015) compared to my study where the gender split was 75% women and 25% men.

The following table indicates the number of the participants whose data have featured in each of the data chapters. As can be seen a large proportion of the participants from both universities appear in each of the data chapters with all of them appearing in at least one chapter

**Figure 7: Participants Represented in Each Data Chapter**

<b><i>Data Chapter</i></b>	<b>National Distance Learning University</b>			<b>Local Face-to-face University</b>			<b><i>Total per Chapter</i></b>
	<b><i>Men</i></b>	<b><i>Women</i></b>	<b><i>Total for HEI</i></b>	<b><i>Men</i></b>	<b><i>Women</i></b>	<b><i>Total for HEI</i></b>	
<b>Chapter 4</b>	2 (66%)	7 (78%)	<b>9 (75%)</b>	2 (100%)	6 (100%)	<b>8 (87%)</b>	<b>17 (85%)</b>
<b>Chapter 5</b>	1 (33%)	8 (89%)	<b>9 (75%)</b>	2 (100%)	4 (66%)	<b>6 (80%)</b>	<b>15 (75%)</b>
<b>Chapter 6</b>	3 (100%)	8 (89%)	<b>11 (92%)</b>	2 (100%)	5 (83%)	<b>7 (87%)</b>	<b>18 (90%)</b>

The percentages indicate the proportion of that group represented in each data chapter.

All of the participants in this study were employed in social care/social work settings at the time of applying for the social work degree via a work-based learning route with 85% sponsored by their employer. The remaining students received other 'packages' of support from employers such as

negotiated time off to attend taught sessions and support with placements. Further information about the 20 participants in the study are provided in participant profiles in Appendix Ten.

### **3.4.3 Methods of Data Collection**

This was a qualitative study with a brief initial questionnaire (Appendix Six) being completed by respondents at the start of the research to collect demographic information with follow up questions seeking some specific additional information about social class (Appendix Seven) (section 3.4.3.1). The main data collection drew on narrative inquiry seeking to elicit the narratives of participants' experiences and involved three focus groups (section 3.4.3.2) followed by a series of individual semi-structured interviews with all the participants (section 3.4.3.3), with 20 first and 15 second interviews. The sequence of data collection phases was as follows:

- Pilot study (focus group 1)
- Main Study
  - i. Focus groups (2 and 3)
  - ii. First individual interviews (20)
  - iii. Second individual interviews (15)

Prior to the main data collection phase I conducted a pilot study comprising a focus group (section 3.4.3.2) attended by four participants from level three of the national distance learning university programme. The pilot study was designed to critically evaluate the planned format and process of the focus groups and review the proceeding interview process (Cohen et al, 2007; Henn et al, 2009). The participants were selected due to their early availability as a group. They were attending a previously arranged event

and all had commutes of over two hours so their ability to participate in any other focus group was compromised. These four participants also took part in two subsequent individual interviews as part of the main study.

This pilot study gave me an opportunity to test out the validity of questions, both content and structure, and critically appraise their relevance to the main research questions. Following the pilot study, I reviewed the group and individual interview techniques adopted as well as the transcription processes. No changes were considered necessary although the pilot study confirmed the need to remind participants of the ground rules (section 3.8.3) and the right to withdraw from participation.

**Figure 8: Data Collected**

Data Collection Stage	Number of participants per programme				Total number by gender		Total number
	The National Distance Learning University		The Local Face-to-face University				
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	
Stage 1: Participant Information Questionnaire	8	3	5	3	14	5	19
Stage 2: Pilot Study	4	0	0	0	4	0	4
Stage 3: Focus Groups (2)	3	3	5	2	8	5	13
Stage 4: 1 <sup>st</sup> interviews	9	3	6	2	15	5	20
Stage 5: 2 <sup>nd</sup> Interviews	7	3	3	2	10	5	15
Stage 6: Social Class Questionnaire	4	3	2	1	6	4	10

The main study included all 20 participants with the four from the pilot study electing to participate in the interview stage thereby also becoming

members of the main study. The main study comprised two focus groups and 35 individual interviews. The rationale for this sequencing of focus groups and subsequent interviews in the main study was to stimulate initial exploration of experiences within the focus groups accessing 'public knowledge' (Michell, 1999) followed by individual interviews to enable deeper consideration of more private experiences (Michell, 1999; Bogdan and Biklen, 2006). The sequencing of the data collection stages enabled participants to reflect on initial contributions and develop these in subsequent stages. This development of ideas is evident in an analysis of participants' data sets as they refer back to a previous discussion and extend points.

The data collection stages of focus groups, first interviews and second interviews allowed me to refine my focus as the data collection progressed. After each stage I sought confirmation of accurate representation from participants by sharing transcripts (section 3.5) and undertook an analysis of the data at each phase to scope out themes (section 3.6).

**Figure 9: Participants' Involvement in Data Collection Phases**

<i><b>NATIONAL DISTANCE LEARNING UNIVERSITY PARTICIPANTS</b></i>						
<i><b>Name</b></i>	<i><b>Participant Information Questionnaire</b></i>	<i><b>Pilot Study</b></i>	<i><b>Focus Group</b></i>	<i><b>First Interview</b></i>	<i><b>Second Interview</b></i>	<i><b>Social Class Questionnaire</b></i>
Sally	✓		Did not attend	25.3.13	20.8.13	
Carl	✓		20.6.2012	15.12.12	9.7.13	✓
Anna			17.7.2012	2.10.12	2.7.13	✓

Petra	✓		Did not attend	19.12.12	Did not attend	✓
Mary	✓	16.6.2012		19.10.12	13.8.13	✓
Lois	✓	16.6.2012		9.10.12	19.9.13	✓
Valerie	✓	16.6.2012		19.10.12	13.8.13	
Rebecca	✓		20.6.2012	25.3.13	9.7.13	
Laura	✓	16.6.2012		9.10.12	19.9.13	
Donny	✓		17.7.2012	20.12.12	9.7.13	✓
Hannah	✓		17.7.2012	22.10.12	Did not attend	
Ivor	✓		17.7.2012	14.11.12	2.7.13	✓
<b>LOCAL FACE-TO-FACE UNIVERSITY PARTICIPANTS</b>						
<b>Name</b>	<b>Participant Information Questionnaire</b>	<b>Pilot Study</b>	<b>Focus Group</b>	<b>First Interview</b>	<b>Second Interview</b>	<b>Social Class Questionnaire</b>
Keith	✓		17.7.2012	17.10.12	9.7.13	✓
Diane	✓		20.6.2012	17.10.12	11.7.13	
Brian	✓		17.7.2012	31.1.12	21.8.13	
Sonia	✓		20.6.2012	19.12.12	Did not attend	
Morag	✓		20.6.2012	19.12.12	11.7.13	
Hilary	✓		20.6.2012	1.10.12	Did not attend	
Holly	✓		17.7.2012	22.10.12	Did not attend	✓
Lillian	✓		Did not attend	20.12.12	18.8.13	✓

For further details of participation see Appendix Five.

#### **3.4.3.1 Questionnaire**

The participant information questionnaire (Appendix Six) was sent with the letter of invitation and focused on eliciting basic, descriptive information including gender, age, academic qualifications, postcode. This information was seen as relevant demographic information. The questionnaire also asked for information about participants' employment including previous employment, the type of support they received from their employer to undertake the programme, current role and factors impacting on their ability to undertake the social work programme. The responses to these questions were useful in relation to their status as work-based learners. Follow up questions regarding social class (Appendix Seven) were sent to all participants at a later stage, with 10 participants returning these. Whilst not a straightforward category, social class as perceived by participants was also hypothesised to be a relevant factor for people accessing work-based learning routes as social class has been identified as pertinent to 'non-traditional' students (Bowl, 2001; Greenbank, 2006; Beagan, 2007) which is relevant to all three research questions. Together this data provided a profile of the participant cohort.

#### **3.4.3.2 Focus Groups**

In addition to the pilot study focus group a further two focus groups were conducted as part of the main study, with data from all three constituting the main study. These focus groups were attended by 13 of the remaining 16 participants - six in the first focus group in the main study and seven in the

second, with each focus group thereby conforming to a recommended group size (Chrzanowska, 2002; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). To encourage attendance, I provided two dates for participants to choose from thereby enabling them to accommodate this activity within their schedules.

Focus groups have a long history in research and whilst traditionally used by market researchers (Morgan, 1997) they have first been extensively used in academic research (Morgan, 1997; Barbour and Kitzinger, 1999; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; King and Horrocks, 2010; Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2013). It is the dynamic nature of these encounters that provides rich data for researchers by identifying areas of debate around which there is either consensus or difference. For participants, they provide opportunities to share their experiences and clarify their positions on certain issues. A strength of this method lies in accessing data that might not be as accessible using individual interviews (Morgan, 1997). Kitzinger identifies some of the advantages gained from this dynamic method:

- It highlights the differences between participants
- It provides opportunities for participants to reflect on the ideas of others
- By using the conflict between participants' ideas 'underlying assumptions and theoretical frameworks' can be explored and how they influence people's thinking

(adapted from Kitzinger, 1994, cited in King and Horricks 2010:70)



Drawing on these potential advantages I chose to use focus groups prior to the individual interviews to give people an opportunity to initially tell their stories or narratives and explore their experiences through discussion with others who have shared a similar experience. King and Horrocks suggest that this can encourage recollection and re-evaluation of experiences whilst encouraging the development of ideas (2010) as well as accessing narratives from the group discussion (White, 2006), a '*negotiation of social identities in a common space of meaning*' (Squire et al, 2013:6). This was borne out in my study where discussion was developed through dialogue between participants, as illustrated by the comments of one participant:

Holly: When you're in the focus group situation ... you're listening to other people. It does help you to think about you know, what it was like for you. (Int. 1: 22.10.2012)

Focus groups require skilled facilitation to ensure that the discussion remains relevant to the research questions with occasional deviations allowed if participants wanted to share particular information. I only occasionally needed to refocus the discussion when it had drifted significantly away from the research questions. I had anticipated that I might need to ensure that some participants did not dominate the discussion (King and Horrocks, 2010) and also ensure that all participants had an opportunity to share their experiences (Cohen et al, 2007). However, whilst some participants were more reticent than others and on occasions needed gentle encouragement to participate, behaviour within the focus groups was very courteous with participants generally taking turns to respond to a question or make a contribution with few incidents of participants interrupting one another. Often previous contributions were used by

participants as springboards for their own contributions and they were able to offer similar or contrasting experiences. The extract below illustrates how participants were comparing their experiences of support from employers:

Sonia: And it differs so much from one Local Authority to another 'cos I know there's a few in our group who are on full pay right through to the end whereas, well (name of Local Authority) it's the first two years and then you get a training wage, what they class as a training wage, and others a bit like yourself, that's it.

Morag: For (name of a different Local Authority) it's your first year and then you drop ...

Diane: For (name of another different Local Authority) it's two years you get full pay and third year you drop. So there is a difference.

Sonia: Yeah, there is a big difference.

Given that the participants came from only two programmes I realised that there might be existing relationships between some of them which proved to be the case for a small number of participants in all three of the focus groups (pilot study and two further focus groups). I was aware that this can increase the confidence of participants in their ability to discuss and interact with each other (King and Horrocks, 2010) although I was also aware that people can resort to established behaviours that may be less helpful. It has been argued that the dynamics of groups are likely to shape the contributions of participants, making the data situation specific in relation to that particular group (Billig, 1991; King and Horrocks, 2010). My aim in the subsequent interviews was to enable participants to revisit issues of

particular concern to them by providing opportunities for them to discuss these on an individual basis.

The social nature of focus groups was made clear in the pilot study focus group where not only individual experiences were shared but the importance of their peer relationships and learning communities (Lave and Wenger, 1991:29) was explored. All four of the participants in the pilot study had studied together over several modules and each of them identified this group as being part of their support network whilst on the programme. Their behaviour towards one another during the focus group discussion demonstrated empathy and sensitivity towards one another as the following extract illustrates:

Lois: I don't know what I'm going to do when I don't belong to that group ... because your uni buddies are your uni buddies and they're not going to be uni buddies anymore and that's going to be hard I think.

Valerie: We'll be social work buddies instead.

Lois: Will we? That'll be good then (Mary: smiles and chuckles) that'll be good.

(FG: 16.6.2012)

This extract is further discussed in section 5.5.

In the focus groups, I adopted the role of moderator (Morgan, 1997) and kept the introduction of the topic general in order not to restrict the discussion by being too directive. This allowed the generation of a broader range of ideas (King and Horrocks, 2010). The question schedule for the

focus groups provided some initial guidance (King and Horrocks, 2010) in an attempt to maintain focus on the research questions:

1. What influenced you to pursue a social work qualification?
2. What personal and/or social challenges, if any, did you face in undertaking the course?
3. What personal, professional and/or social opportunities, if any, did you experience in undertaking the course?
4. What was your experience of the educational journey?

I also endeavoured to create an environment in which participants felt comfortable (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2013) to develop their own direction to the discussion – when one participant responded to my question then other participants would offer their own perspectives in response to the point made and hence the focus of the discussion evolved. If on occasions I thought the discussion had drifted too far away from the research questions I repeated the original question to re-orientate the discussion towards the research questions. I also diverged from the questions on occasions and used probing questions when a particular area of discussion raised interesting issues in relation to the research questions.

When the focus group discussions were completed I transcribed the audio recordings (section 3.5) and sent a copy to the participants asking for feedback regarding accuracy with the option of having sections removed and/or making amendments. This process was intended to serve as a '*validation check*' (Creswell, 2007) and was in the spirit of collaboration

ensuring that participants have control over their own narrative (Nind, 2011). I requested feedback within a month to ensure that the process of amending can be confined to the pre-writing up stage. Only one student responded requesting a minor amendment to a section the meaning of which she felt was ambiguous.

### **3.4.3.3 Individual Interviews**

Each participant was invited to attend first and second interviews with 20 people taking part in one interview and 15 opting to participate in a second. The reasons for not taking part in a second varied - one person was unable to attend both second interview dates offered, two women went on maternity leave and I lost contact with them and two failed to respond to the invitation. For most participants, being interviewed followed participation in a focus group (only three participants interviewed did not attend a focus group).

Like focus groups, interviews provide an opportunity to elicit narratives of experience. The questions asked in the focus groups (Appendix Eight) were asked again in the first interview in case participants wished to develop their answers following further consideration. This also helped to maintain consistency with the participants who had not attended a focus group. Again, I used prompt questions to gently probe for more detail or refocus participants when necessary. I tried to ensure that these questions were addressed during the course of the interview however, the ordering of them required flexibility in an attempt to be responsive to participants' narratives (Thompkins et al, 2008; Kvale and Brinkman, 2009).

For the second interview, different questions were asked (Appendix Nine) following the initial phases of thematic analysis (section 3.6) of the focus groups and first interviews. This phase of analysis enabled me to explore further initial themes that had been identified (Figure 12) (section 3.6) and refine the focus of the second interviews which centred on accommodating roles and associated identities (Appendix Nine). The second individual interview followed after a time lapse of between 5-11 months. This was longer than I had originally anticipated due to the time-consuming process of transcribing and sharing transcripts and then allowing participants time to amend and/or consider this prior to the second interview. It was important to transcribe all focus groups and interviews fully before undertaking the second interview in order that I could revisit aspects that were unclear and needed to be explored during the next interview. The validation check for the interviews involved the following stages:

- Stage 1: Interview
- Stage 2: Preparing transcript
- Stage 3: Sharing transcript with participant and invitation to make amendments
- Stage 4: Making amendments to transcript if required
- Stage 5 Arranging second interview (repeat stages 1-4)

As was the case for the focus groups, the date, time and venue of the interviews was negotiated with individuals. Bergen (1993) suggests that personal interaction is better achieved by interviewing people in their homes. She found in her study that interviewees felt more relaxed and in control, playing an active part in the process as the host. The interview

therefore becomes more interactive and can assume the characteristics of a conversation within which trust can be established. Venues negotiated for the interviews included:

- Participants' homes
- Other participants' homes
- Participants' places of work
- In a University building, sometimes their university, sometimes the other university

I attempted to harness the advantages of interviews as a method of data collection by using them in the following ways. Firstly, I attempted to give the interview the characteristics of a '*conversation with a purpose*' (Burgess, 1984:102) by minimising the power differentials and creating a '*genuine rather than instrumental rapport*' (Maynard, 1995:15-16). Secondly, using interviews enabled me to generate '*rich insights into people's biographies, experiences, opinions, values, attitudes, aspirations and feelings*' (May, 2011:131). This was evident in the contrast between the data collected using the questionnaires and the interview transcripts. Thirdly, interviews allowed me to elicit narratives with participants dialogically expressing themselves using their own words to describe their experiences. Whilst the advantages certainly outweighed the disadvantages, it is worth noting some of the practical challenges I encountered using interviews. It was very time consuming in a number of ways - negotiating suitable times and venues for the interviews was often a protracted affair; conducting 35 interviews and three focus groups each lasting approximately one hour, often involving

considerable travel; transcribing over 350,000 words; generating large amounts of data which meant the analysis was also very time consuming.

In terms of the epistemological status and value of interviews-as-data, Holland and Ramazanoglu (1995) identify three approaches to the interview as a research instrument. The first approach is that the truth can be accessed via reliable techniques which control subjectivity and thereby avoid contamination. The second is that interviews are a singular account given in particular circumstances. At another time a different text would be produced reflecting Clandinin and Connelly's concept of a '*three dimensional space*' (2000:54) that is occupied by the researcher and the researched when the story is shared. This makes analysis and making firm conclusions challenging – '*we can only allow diverse accounts to speak for themselves through multiple possible readings of transcripts as texts*' (Holland and Ramazanoglu, 1995:144) or as Mensinga suggests, recreating the 'three dimensional space' (2009). The third approach, positioned somewhere between these two is that which I adhere to that there is a material reality to which access can be gained through people's accounts but there is no definitive arrival point and '*we can never be sure that we've got it right*' (Holland and Ramazanoglu, 1995:15).

### **3.5 TRANSCRIBING**

Transcription of recordings is not without difficulties whether this is regarding focus group sessions or individual interviews. It is suggested that when transcribing it is important to try to ensure that the written version is as



loyal as possible to the oral version (Roberts, 1997; Huberman and Miles, 2002; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Roberts states that:

*'The challenge for the transcriber is to produce transcriptions that are accurate and readable but that are also reflexive in how they make explicit to the reader the constructed nature of written talk and so the problematic nature of accuracy and readability' (1997:168).*

This means considering in the transcription other forms of communication that occur in the interaction such as pauses and how this affects the interpretation attributed to the spoken word. Roberts also argues that the political issues of representation must be addressed requiring reflexivity and ensuring that issues of power within the relationship between the transcriber and the speaker are acknowledged (1997) (section 3.10). Borrowing from Bourdieu (1991), Roberts argues that transcribers should endeavour to represent *'the whole social person'* (1997:170). I tried to do this by working hard to ensure that the transcription was a 'true' reflection of their speech and that participant's meaning was not lost. This was verified in the sharing of transcripts (section 3.7.5). One participant commented on being surprised at how 'northern' she sounded referring to some colloquialisms she had used; I was aware in this instance of how as a 'southerner' my representation of the data may have been affected. This raised the potential ethical issue in relation to how much control over the final transcription participants have and my awareness of power as the researcher in the negotiation of this. I decided to prepare two versions of the transcripts. The 'complete' transcript included many of the usual

features of spoken interaction such as ‘erms’, emphasis, repetitions, false starts and regional pronunciations (for example ‘*me mam*’). In order to aid the process of reading for participants I sent them a ‘cleaned’ copy (Elliot, 2005), that was ‘true’ to the original and signalling, with the key in Figure 10, when sections had been excluded or interpretation was included. In order to prepare participants I suggested they may find the complete transcript difficult to read and told them that I would be ‘cleaning’ the transcripts to aid reading. I invited feedback and there were no objections to this. The total volume of recorded material meant that I was unable in the time available to me to transcribe all of the recordings myself so I paid for half to be transcribed. To ensure accuracy I checked over these transcripts by reading them whilst listening to the recording and made any necessary alterations. To ensure consistency I made all the alterations to the ‘clean’ transcripts myself whilst listening to the recordings to ensure the ‘cleaned’ transcript captured as far as possible an accurate representation of their spoken comments.

#### **Figure 10: Transcription Key**

(FG. 1: 16.6.2012)	The number and date of the focus group
(Int. 1: 20.12.2012)	First or second interview and date
<b>(Bold)</b>	When the participant gives emphasis to a word
(chuckles)	Additional information or researcher’s observations informed by field notes
...	Change in the flow of speech
?, !	Punctuation such as this is added to reflect meaning to the speaker

‘me mam’

Phrases signalling regional pronunciation have been included

In addition to the digital recordings that were transcribed I used field notes (Appendix Twelve) during the focus groups and interviews to supplement the recordings and capture particular observations including non-verbal reactions and emotions. These notes supported my interpretation of the focus groups and interviews in the transcriptions, for example, ‘*affective support evident between participant, importance of group*’. Field notes were also used for reflections on the research process and incorporated into the evaluation of the methodology.

### **3.6 DATA ANALYSIS AND REPRESENTATION**

The main method of data analysis in this study was thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2013; Clarke and Braun, 2014; Bryman, 2016). I chose Braun and Clarke’s method of thematic analysis (2006) as it offered a robust analytical framework with six clear phases aimed at identifying ‘themes’ that responded to the research questions (see below). Braun and Clarke argue that whilst thematic analysis is widely used it is not always identified as the adopted analytical method and is sometimes subsumed under a different label (2006). Their method is based upon their definition of a theme:

*‘something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within a data set’ (2006:82).*

Data analysis in this study was an iterative process with initial analysis being tentatively undertaken as I conducted the focus groups and interviews and then transcribed them. A large amount of data was collected with individual data sets from 20 participants comprising extracts from their comments in focus groups and interviews. Through iterative analysis, I began to recognise connections between personal narratives and commonalities across data sets (Figure 12). In line with Braun and Clarke's method of thematic analysis themes were revisited when all the data had been analysed systematically and a set of themes were identified in relation to each research question (Appendix Eleven).

The process of analysis and interpretation of data is a contentious area in research, one that Holland and Ramazanoglu suggest is essentially a '*site of struggle*' (1995:131). The social nature of interpretation cannot be neutralised by techniques of analysis, as Squire et al suggest '*our presence, our very bodies, are imprinted upon all that we do*' (2013:21). Interpretation is a process whereby experience is connected to theory and theory is used to make sense of experience. Interpretation becomes a positive, creative process which characterises both the vulnerability and the power of the researcher (section 3.10). Holland and Ramazanoglu argue that:

*'we can show that interpretation is a political, contested and unstable process between the lives of the researchers and those of the researched. Interpretation needs somehow to unite a passion for 'truth' with explicit rules of research method that can make some conclusions stronger than others.'* (1995:127).

Clarke and Braun argue that the flexibility of thematic analysis as a method means that it is compatible with a broad range of epistemological and theoretical approaches (2013). A narrative inquiry approach aiming to elicit narratives of experience from participants (section 3.3) in this study has generated data sets from 20 participants and by applying thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to this data I am able to search for and identify patterns that span the whole data set.

In thematic analysis, the prevalence of an issue is important in identifying what counts as a theme with Braun and Clarke (2006) suggesting that prevalence relates to the space a theme occupies within a data item and its occurrence across the whole data set. It is not the frequency of a theme that signals its relevance as a theme but the consistency of the theme across and within the data (Floersch et al, 2010). The 'keyness' (Braun and Clarke, 2006:82) of the theme is also important and is evident if it captures a particularly important issue across the data set that relates specifically to one of the research questions. Braun and Clarke are clear that there is no scientific calculation to identify prevalence and 'keyness' but that researcher's judgement along with consistent application of the analytical method is necessary. In working towards identifying themes I used Braun and Clarke's method of six phases:

1. Becoming familiar with the data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for overarching themes
4. Reviewing themes

5. Defining and naming themes
6. Presenting the findings

(adapted from Braun and Clarke, 2006:87)

In this study, my application of Braun and Clarke's method was as follows:

### **Phase 1: Becoming Familiar with the Data**

The data collection process began with the three focus groups followed by individual interviews which were all digitally recorded. I listened to each one on at least two occasions before they were transcribed. I continued to familiarise myself with the depth and breadth of the data with multiple readings of the transcripts (O'Shea, 2014). I approached the process of analysis with caution questioning my interpretations and, in line with an inductive approach, not limiting the scope of the search and gave full and equal weight to all data items. On each reading, I made brief notes and initial observations about the content making note of any similarities and differences between the participants in relation to the three research questions.

### **Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes**

When the data set for the focus groups was complete I started to identify a range of preliminary codes against sections of the transcript focusing on the specific ways in which the data related to the research questions (Figure 11). Having familiarised myself with all the data I worked systematically through the transcripts of each focus group and marked sections of them

that were illustrative of these initial codes making sure the coding process was thorough and inclusive.

**Figure 11 Generating Codes**

<i>Extract from Morag's Transcript</i>	<i>Codes</i>	<i>Research Questions</i>
<p>He (husband) really is a typical northern man. Does not see it (housework) as his role at all. He has done <b>my</b> dishes for <b>me</b> or he is tidied <b>my</b> living room for <b>me</b>.</p> <p>He leaves me alone when I've got (study) to do which is great...</p> <p>But with regards to the house its always been very much my department and he hasn't really picked up that mantle while, while I was doing other things. I don't think he ever will.</p>	<p>Gender - relative to the North</p> <p>Gendered roles at home</p> <p>Support (space at home for study)</p> <p>Gendered roles – balancing commitments.</p> <p>Support (lack of support from partner)</p>	<p><i>Research Q3: What personal and social challenges and opportunities do students identify whilst undertaking work-based learning routes in social work education?</i></p>

I used broad encompassing preliminary codes such as 'relationship with employer', 'learning environment' and 'balancing commitments', coding for as many potential themes as possible in relation to each research question. By adopting an inclusive approach, rather than working to a pre-existing coding frame, I ensured I did not exclude data that could respond to the

research questions. I repeated this coding for the first interviews using these initial codes but also adding to these if I identified new ones. The second interviews were conducted after phase 3 allowing a refinement of the interview schedule (Appendix Nine) and providing an opportunity to drill down further into potential themes. I then repeated phases one and two for the second interview data set.

### **Phase 3: Searching for Themes**

At this point I had a list of codes that I sorted by considering the relationship between each code and combining codes into a range of potential themes with a 'central organising concept' (Braun et al, 2014: 102) for example the codes of 'balancing commitments' and 'identity' contributed to the potential theme of 'multiple identities' (Figure 12). I then collated all the relevant data extracts under each potential theme linked to a research question ensuring that all data was included under one theme. This was done in stages as I worked through the transcripts for each focus group and first interview and organised this material into tables which recorded all of the contributions from each participant in relation to each potential theme. The interview schedule for second interviews reflected the potential themes allowing me to focus more explicitly on specific areas and explore these with participants in greater depth. The analysis was a recursive process moving backwards and forwards across the data set at different phases of data collection as each data set was complete and added to the existing data.



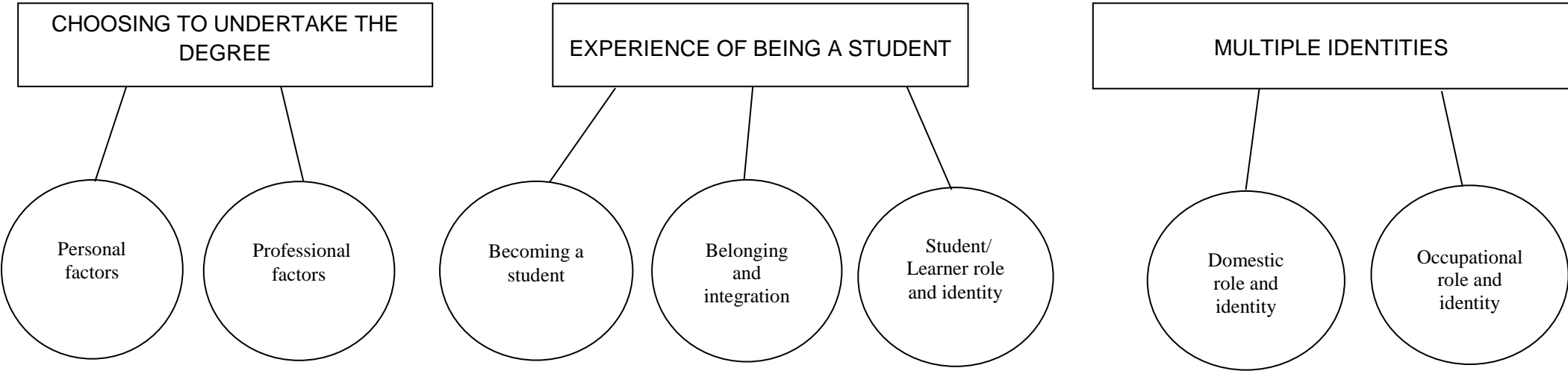
Figure 12

PROGRESSION OF THEMES

1. The research questions, examples of codes and potential themes identified from the initial thematic analysis of focus groups and individual interviews:

Research Q1: What factors influence students' decisions to undertake the social work degree via work-based learning routes?			Research Q2: How do students experience the educational journey?				Research Q3: What personal and social challenges and opportunities do students identify whilst undertaking work-based learning routes in social work education?		
Code: Relationship with work	Code: Support from employer	Code: Factors influencing choice to undertake course	Code: Relationship with education	Code: Learning environment	Code: Belonging	Code: Support	Code: Balancing commitments	Code: Identity	Code: Other challenges and opportunities

2. The potential themes identified following a thematic analysis of all data



#### **Phase 4: Reviewing the Themes**

Reviewing the themes involved a process of refinement following a further examination of the data extracts and themes. During this process, I continued to make changes to the themes I had initially identified. This included dividing themes that had a large amount of data and creating new more focused themes. In addition to this I collapsed two small themes into one more substantial theme, an example being 'the relationship with work' and 'support from employers' which became 'professional factors'.

Following the reorganisation of themes, I also recoded some extracts and moved them to other themes where there was a closer association or regrouped extracts where a stronger theme was identified. This process was helpful as patterns amongst the data set became clearer and the shape and depth of the data became evident.

My overall aim in organising data according to themes was to identify where patterns in experiences occurred and to align themes with my research questions. Consequently, some data was excluded from the final thesis. The decisions about the inclusion of data were consistent with Braun and Clarke's method and based upon whether it was consistent with the data set and/or its significance to a research question, criteria that was applied systematically to all the data (2006). Thus, how the social work programme impacted upon participants' social work practice is excluded for the purposes of this thesis but is considered relevant for future work (section 7.7.1).

## **Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes**

The defining and naming of themes was finalised as the drafts of the data chapters were written (Figure 13). A further development of the themes had occurred when the analysis of the data revealed themes that were either too broad or too narrow for example the initial theme of 'personal factors' was too broad and became two themes – 'social and educational backgrounds – considering the impact' and 'current family context – affecting choices'. I also looked for any significant overlap between themes that would benefit from greater specificity at the same time being conscious that to achieve a coherent analysis of the data set relationships between the themes was appropriate.

In naming the final set of themes I looked again for consistency of themes across and within participants' data sets (Figure 13) and the contribution of each theme to the research questions. The finalising of the themes included a careful review of the complete data set to ensure that the 'thematic map' (an overall view of the complete set of themes in relation to the research questions) accurately reflected the meanings of participants in relation to the research questions (Appendix Eleven).

Figure 13

## THE OCCURANCE OF THEMES IN PARTICIPANTS' DATA

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND THEMES	PARTICIPANTS FROM BOTH UNIVERSITY PROGRAMMES																					
	National Distance Learning University													Local University								
	Sally	Carl	Anna	Petra	Lois	Mary	Valerie	Rebecca	Laura	Donny	Hannah	Ivan		Keith	Diane	Brian	Sonia	Morag	Hilary	Holly	Lillian	
Research Question 1	What factors influence students' decisions to undertake the social work degree via work-based learning routes?																					
Social and educational backgrounds	X		X		X	X			X	X				X	X	X	X	X			X	
Current family contexts	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X					X	X		X	X	X		X	
'Privileging the qualified voice'	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X		X	X	X	X	X	X	
Work-based learning: why this route	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Research Question 2	How do students experience the educational journey?																					
Becoming a 'student'	X	X	X	X	X				X	X		X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Placements		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X				X	X	X	X			
The learning environment	X	X			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X		X	
Learning Communities	X	X			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X		X	

<b>Research Question 3</b>	<b>What personal and social challenges and opportunities do students identify social work whilst undertaking work-based learning routes in education?</b>																			
Conflicts with roles and identities in the workplace		X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X				X	X		X		
Incongruence with roles & identities outside workplace	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X			X	X		X	X	X	X
Support from others			X		X	X	X		X					X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Being a student at home	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X		X		X	X		X	X	X	X

## **Phase 6: Presenting the Findings**

When writing the final version of the thesis and data chapters the themes were brought together to present the data in relation to each research question. Data extracts were chosen to illustrate the themes identified through the iterative process of analysis. As it was not possible to include all relevant data extracts within the scope of the thesis, extracts were selected on the basis that they were vivid and compelling illustrations of a particular theme or analytic point throwing light on a larger phenomenon evident across the data set and in that sense, are each to be viewed as ‘telling cases’ (Mitchell, 1984).

Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that thematic analysis is a flexible method of analysis and can be applied in different ways depending upon the ontological and epistemological position of the researcher using an inductive or deductive approach. The inductive approach to thematic analysis adopted in this study suited the exploratory aims of the research questions by searching for, identifying and analysing patterns or ‘themes’ from within data. With methods of narrative inquiry central to my approach, inductive thematic analysis has encouraged me to explore the content of the focus groups and interviews including identifying the collectivities of experience constituting the themes. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that this method of analysis applied at a ‘latent level’ enables the researcher to interpret the data and make links between the participants’ data and underpinning theories of social constructionism (Dugdale, 1990; Torres et al, 2009). By giving prominence to the socially constructed nature of experience and the meanings attached by participants to their experiences the analysis reveals

the rich and complex nature of the data '*to reflect reality and to unpick or unravel the surface of 'reality'*' (Braun and Clarke, 2006:81).

Criticism of thematic analysis includes researchers claiming to have used this analytical approach but not identifying clearly how they arrived at themes and why there were significant (Bazeley, 2013). Bazeley (2013) goes on to argue that researchers should provide an audit trail of key decisions contributing to the identification of themes. I chose Braun and Clarke's method of thematic analysis (2006) as it clearly identifies a six stage analytical process (above) which encourages rigour and transparency. In response to Bazeley's criticism (2013) I have also included an audit trail identifying how the themes were identified (Figures 11 and 12). Thematic analysis can also be criticised for fragmenting an individual's narrative and experience into the construction of themes by the researcher. Whilst I recognise this is an inherent issue with this analytical approach, as with other approaches, I have addressed this by sharing chapter extracts with participants to ensure my representation is accurate and the meaning is not lost (section 3.7.5). I also present a brief case study (Mitchell, 1983, 1984; Flyvbjerg, 2006; Gillham, 2010; Yin, 2014) at the end of each data chapter to provide an individual narrative of experience. This provides a bridge (Stryker, 2008:21) to narrative inquiry by illustrating how the themes within the specific chapter coalesce in one participant's experience.

Squire et al (2013) suggest that researchers should continue to question their role in analysing data:

*‘Does someone have special analytical insights simply because they gathered the original data? What right, if any, do we have to challenge the interpretations which researchers make about their work? Is there ever an end-point to analysis, or is it always, and only, ‘provisional’?’ (2013:18).*

I am presenting an interpretation of the data and recognise that others may bring their own meanings to this. As such, whilst I aim throughout this thesis to make my analysis and my analytic processes transparent my conclusions are of course open to criticism and discussion (Holland and Ramazanoglu, 1995).

Whilst thematic analysis is the main analytical lens applied to the data, I also signal in the data chapters when participants explicitly present their journey into and through higher education as personal narratives, that is, following the conventional format of a sequence of events, connected in a meaningful way to provide insights into people’s experiences of the world (Hinchman and Hinchman, 1997). For example, ‘I think when I was at school they put you in that box in the level and even if you loved that subject you are never going to get out of that box no matter how hard you tried’ (Lois, Int. 1: 9.10.2012). There is also strong enough evidence in the data to suggest the existence of specific ‘public narratives’ (May, 2004) which are at work in the way participants examine and understand their own experiences (section 3.3.). The concept of a ‘public narrative’ (Elliott, 2005:129) is a term used by those within the school of narrative inquiry (Somers, 1994; Andrews, 2002; Elliott, 2005; Phoenix and Sparkes, 2008) to broadly describe cultural



discourses, providing particular representations of reality and social relations that circulate in social contexts. For example, there are powerful public narratives about the nature and meanings of gender which contribute to the ways in which individuals make sense of their own gendered experiences. The value of the notion of 'public narrative' therefore is that it helps to contextualise what can appear to be individual stories. Personal narratives are not 'free fictions' but are produced in interaction with public narratives providing individuals with '*narrative location*' (May, 2004:171). The term 'counter narrative' (Andrews, 2002:1) is also used in this thesis to denote a deviation from public narratives signalling some resistance to them. Of course, identifying what counts as a public or counter narrative empirically is far from straightforward. In this study, traces of specific personal, public and counter narratives are identified in the data and their significance for participation in higher education/work based learning routes discussed (section 7.3).

### **3.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

A range of factors are considered in this section to ensure that the study has a robust ethical approach (Tracy, 2010).

#### **3.7.1 Ethical Approval**

Permissions were granted by the relevant groups at both universities. The following ethical procedures and requirements have been adhered to during the course of this research:

- The national distance learning university Code of Practice for Research Involving Human Participants
- The national distance learning university SRPP requirements
- The local face-to-face university Ethics in Research and Consultancy Policy
- BERA Guidelines
- ESRC Framework for Research Ethics

Guillemim and Gillam (2004) however, suggest that because the approval of ethics committees does not necessarily determine what actually happens during the research nor has direct control over the researcher, that it is ultimately the responsibility of the researcher for ensuring that the research adheres to appropriate ethical standards. Renold et al suggest that the evolving nature of research requires researchers to pay attention to 'ethics in practice' continuously recognising the intersubjective and dynamic nature of micro ethical issues (2008). This has remained part of my accountability to the participants, ethical procedures and the research community during the research process.

In order to address these concerns, I was prepared to take further measures. If there were any changes that affected risks to the participants or me then I would have discussed with my PhD supervisors and if necessary presented this to both universities' research ethics committees for further consideration. On completion of the study I agreed to advise the national distance learning university and local face-to-face university ethics

committees of any ethical issues that had arisen during the study but this has not been necessary.

### **3.7.2 Consent**

The negotiation of consent highlights the importance of the researcher/participant relationship and of reflexivity in the interview process (Finch, 1993; Bloom, 1998; Renold et al, 2008; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Renold et al further explore the '*intersubjective, situated and negotiated approach*' (2008:442) to research ethics overall arguing that consent is often sought via a hierarchical relationship with consent then being in a constant state of conceptualising. Establishing a state of consent is however, a requirement of research in HEIs and I therefore asked participants to complete the consent form (Appendix Two) which has been filed in a secure place.

Participants were also given a programme specific Research Participant Information sheet providing further information about the research process including consent, confidentiality and other ethical issues (Appendix Three). Confidentiality is not absolute but has caveats and students were advised of these and the consequences of any breaches at the beginning of data collection although no breaches of confidentiality occurred. Had there been any disclosures from participants that may be in breach of institutional or professional codes of practice/conduct (GSCC, 2002; HCPC, 2012) then I would have sought advice from my PhD supervisor about further action and reported it to the respective ethics committees of the HEIs. This could have included advising either university of any student or staff behaviour that

breached codes and/or advising the GSCC/HCPC and employer if any behaviour of qualified staff breached the GSCC 2002 and HCPC 2012 codes of practice. I was aware that it might have been required, in recognition of the dynamic quality of the research, to revisit and adapt the consent process at various phases (Peled, 2010) although this has not been necessary. At each stage of participation I ensured consent remained unchanged.

### **3.7.3 Maintaining Confidentiality and Storage of Information**

All participants were advised that their contributions would be anonymised when written up for publication purposes and wider dissemination, using gender specific pseudonyms for themselves and family members. The same pseudonyms have been used throughout the thesis to create consistency and allow the reader to follow the participants' stories across the data chapters. The personal details of the participants have not been kept electronically in a transportable capacity but have been stored securely. Furthermore, participants were advised before the focus groups and interviews proceeded that I intended, with their consent, to record the session and that the recording of their contributions would be initialled as an aide memoire to help maintain confidentiality. A confidentiality statement was signed by the person I paid to transcribe some of the data.

The nature of the data collection process involved, as anticipated, the disclosure of sensitive information (Renzetti and Lee, 1993). I ensured that participants in the focus groups were aware of the ground rules prior to participation (Morgan, 1997; King and Horrocks, 2010) and advised them to

consider what information they were happy sharing. The ground rules for the focus groups were based upon the following:

- Issues of confidentiality with an agreed procedure should concerns over practice arise.
- The importance of showing respect to others
- The right of participants not to disclose information
- Encouraging participation from all members
- Commitment to anti-discriminatory behaviour

(Adapted from The Open University, 2011)

#### **3.7.4 Managing Endings of Focus Groups and Individual Interviews**

Time was given at the end of the focus groups and interviews for the participants to ask questions about the research, clarify certain points about the research process, reiterate the aims of the research and the next stages and ensure that the contact details were clear. Participants appeared interested in the process of the research but there were only occasional questions mostly about the arrangements for the next stages and the timing of the research process overall.

#### **3.7.5 Information Sharing and Data Analysis with Participants**

Participants were briefed about the research in advance in the Research Participant Information Sheet (Appendix Three) sent out with the letter of invitation. This included details of the aims and process of the research; my

role and expectations; the role of participants; the ethical guidelines followed; intended audiences and dissemination strategies. Participants were also encouraged to ask questions throughout the study and were informed about the progress of the research at various stages (see below). Spector-Mersel (2010) argues that this information can shape the story that is told by the participant suggesting that research interview stories are created by the participant *for* the researcher. Other information offered, or to be offered, includes:

- Contact details (including mine, the lead PhD supervisor and a third party at the local face-to-face university) in case they required additional information relating to their participation and/or related ethical issues.
- Emerging themes and further questions for the first and second interviews
- Sections of data chapters that included individual participant's narrative extracts
- A summary of the research conclusions and an opportunity to discuss these
- Access to the completed PhD thesis
- Access to any published papers based upon the research
- Attendance at a research presentation

Whilst I acknowledge that as the researcher I have had a leading role in the production of the findings and the thesis, I have tried to include participants

at various stages promoting collaboration including amending their transcripts and inviting feedback. Participants have also been sent draft excerpts of data chapters to comment on. Five participants responded to this invitation all stating that they enjoyed reading them. Three participants made particular comments about the content, 'It was a true reflection of my feelings' (Petra), 'I found it very interesting and feel like you've used my views well' (Keith) and 'You certainly 'got me'' (Laura) which signals that my interpretation and representation has been true to their accounts. Whilst this provides some reassurance to me as the researcher that I have represented the participants' narratives accurately and is validation of the analysis, I am also aware that this represents a small proportion of the participants and may not therefore be representative of all views. It is of course possible that some participants did not want to participate in this process or that some may not have felt empowered to do so fully. Problematic as this may be, I have applied an ethical approach to this process and attempted to include participants and acknowledged the limitations of this.

The aim of the dissemination of the thesis is to enable participants to further share in the research process and findings. Through the data collection processes most participants have had opportunities to talk about their experiences both individually and collectively, learning from the totality of these experiences. Their contributions have been acknowledged in the thesis and I hope they will have a sense of ownership of the new understandings that we will have generated together.

### **3.8 THE RESEARCHER-PARTICIPANT RELATIONSHIP**

Feminists have been very critical of the hierarchical relationships characteristic of social research and have '*argued for the significance of a genuine rather than instrumental rapport*' between researcher and researched (Maynard, 1995:15-16). My aim during the study was to create a genuine rapport and minimise the power differentials thereby creating a collaborative research space. Focus groups, used in this study, are one method that can engender collaboration and reduce the power of the researcher (Bowl, 2000). Minimising power differentials however, is not straightforward.

Bloom (1998) suggests that feminist methodology not only aims to dismantle the barriers between the researcher and the researched but also the barriers between women, although goes on to say that it can sometimes be difficult to minimise the power differentials and create a '*comfortable and effective research space*'. I endeavoured to create an enabling environment that would allow individuals to express themselves (McLaughlin, 2007; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). King and Horrocks argue that this requires certain skills and attributes from the researcher including expression of warmth, an ability to put people at ease, being a good listener, positive non-verbal communication, clarifying, summarising, closing down dominant members tactfully and encouraging the participation of all members (2010). My roles as a social worker, probation officer and a lecturer have developed my confidence in the application of these skills that



are based upon professional values of trust, honesty and genuineness (GSCC, 2002; Smith, 2010; HCPC, 2012). I also practiced skills of focusing participants, being empathetic and supportive and enabling the expression of emotion (Thompson, 2009; Lishman, 2009). An example of this is in the interview with Petra when she was talking about how she told her mother that she had passed the degree:

Petra: The first person I called was my mum. You know, I was just so proud ... (Petra briefly becomes upset)

Me: Are you all right? Do you want me to switch that off (pointing to the digital recorder)

Petra: No, no.

R: (Pause) So that was obviously a really emotional thing (pause), if you don't mind talking about it?

Petra: No, no (indicating it was okay to go on)

Me: That seems to have had a really, been a really powerful thing for you. (Int. 1: 19.12.2012)

This extract illustrates how, whilst being empathetic, I also behaved ethically and upheld her right to withdraw her participation and share only what she felt comfortable with. The emotional impact of some of the discussion on some participants reinforced the need for me to carefully explain anonymity, confidentiality, the right of participants to withdraw at any stage of the data collection phases (information contained in the Research Information Sheet and Consent Form) as well as reinforce the ground rules (section 3.7.3).

Costley et al (2011) suggest that whilst the role of a researcher is to gain the confidence of participants in order for them to share their experiences the material gains for the researcher do not always sit comfortably with claims of participation and empowerment. However, my aim, similar to that of Bowl (2001) was to develop a research approach that focused on the interests of the participants with methods that encouraged them to voice the challenges and opportunities that resulted from their access to and participation in higher education. As the research relationship developed, building on a previous tutor relationship, I fostered a collaborative approach throughout.

It was my aim throughout the research to ensure that the impact of hierarchy on the research process was minimised (Oakley 1981; Finch 1993; Maynard, 1995; Bloom, 1998; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009) and as far as possible ensure a '*more collaborative knowledge-construction process*' was created (Romm, cited in Henn et al, 2009:33) enhancing the reliability of the data (Bowl, 2000). I also endeavoured to do this by being prepared to answer questions from participants and sharing my own experiences if asked (Oakley, 1981; Finch, 1993; Kelly, 1993; Smith, 2010). Holland and Ramazanoglu (1995) agree with the concept of reciprocity, viewing interviews as social events and research therefore as a social process which becomes a learning process for all. This following data extract is an example of the learning that Morag identified as a result of participating in the research:

Morag: I just think reflecting this afternoon with you I have totally separated being a student from absolutely everything else and I know I have but I didn't really think about that until I had reflected on it (Int. 2: 11.7.2013).

Holland and Ramazanoglu (1995) describe an ideal to which some researchers aspire which involves the participants being involved in every stage of the research process. However, they do recognise a contradiction between this and treating the information both critically as well as sociologically.

The complexity of the research relationship was characterised in a number of ways which were fluid and dependent upon the time and the context of the interview. The characteristics that helped define my relationship with participants included research role (researcher/participant), organisational role (lecturer/student), gender (woman/woman or man), social context (visitor to home/host) well as other factors such as social work practitioner status, locality and age. The relationship between the participants and I can be defined according to a combination of these reflecting our subjectivities and producing layers and complexities to the relationship.

There are inherent complexities and contradictions within these various aspects. For example, whilst the researcher is traditionally seen as more powerful than a participant, as a non-practicing social worker I also felt that the participant was powerful and as a researcher seeking participants' stories that the participants were more powerful in deciding what they would share.

Being a tutor/lecturer on the programmes that the participants were enrolled on, this type of research constitutes 'insider research' (Costley et al, 2011).

Insider research can have potential for tensions within the research relationship and also has an inherent power hierarchy. There is also the potential influence of being '*steeped in the habitus of academic life*' (Bowl, 2008:186) thereby impacting on the research relationship and perspective of the researcher (Bowl, 2008). I was very aware of this throughout and in order to minimise any role confusion I endeavoured to maintain the integrity of my researcher role with students, colleagues and institutions when engaged in research activities rather than slip into my tutor/lecturer identity. On one occasion, there was discussion in one of the focus groups about the roles of staff from the national distance learning university. Whilst I acknowledged the reciprocal nature of the engagement I felt it important to maintain the boundaries around my role shaped by time and context. It would have been easy to have reverted to my organisational role and whilst I acknowledged their comments I remained focused on the research and facilitated a discussion exploring the issue in relation to their experiences of being a student.

I was also aware of ethical implications. In my role as tutor/lecturer I was involved in the marking of some of their assignments. Students needed to be reassured that participation or lack of it would not impact upon this role at all. In order to reassure all prospective participants, the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix Three) stated that they could withdraw at any stage of the study and this will not affect their standing on the course in any way. Had conflict arisen then I would have dealt with it in a way that demonstrates my accountability to my professional and personal values, professional codes (GSCC, 2002; HCPC, 2012) and those relating to

research ethics (the local face-to-face university and the national distance learning university ethical codes and Economic Social Research Council Framework for Research Ethics, 2015) and my accountability to my employers. I gave assurances that I would deal with any conflict openly and honestly and any ethical issues would have been reported back to the university ethics committees. If participants had wanted further opportunities to discuss any concerns they also had the contact details for the HEI with whom they are enrolled and my PhD supervisor. I was not aware, however, at any stage of the research, that students found my dual roles problematic. One benefit of the dual roles was that I had already established a relationship with 18 of the 20 participants who took part in either the focus group or interviews and a rapport already existed which appeared to put them at ease and enable them to share very personal information.

The power that exists, it should be borne in mind, manifests itself not only in relationships based on domination but also those of empowerment. I planned through the design, interaction and dissemination of the research for the process to be empowering providing opportunities for feedback on transcripts and data chapters. However, the dynamics previously identified existed throughout the research as features beyond the research process and could not be totally mitigated. Moreover, I was never fully aware of exactly how this impacted upon participants' contributions. From my perspective, I found the research relationship with the participants to some extent liberating as it meant that rather than carry the authority appropriate to my role as lecturer/tutor within an organisation I could relate to

participants as an independent researcher with the participant in control of what information they shared with me.

As a social process, it is perhaps inevitable that the dynamics between me and the participants influenced the discussion in focus groups and individual interviews (Finch, 1993; Kelly, 1993; Holland and Ramazanoglu, 1995; Maynard, 1995; Bloom, 1998; Dominelli, 2002; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). I had taught all but two of the participants and in some cases had on-going teaching relationships. I was aware of established power dynamics due to these professional relationships. I was also aware that this may have influenced their agreement to participate in the research (Phoenix, 1995). Furthermore, Spector-Mersel (2010) argues that in narrative inquiry interviews stories are created by the participant *for* the researcher and that this is influenced by a number of factors – by what the participant understands the purpose of the research to be, by the aims of the participant in telling the story and by the interaction between the participant and the researcher. Consequently, they are a reconstruction that is '*an expression of experience that is not ... a direct translation of it*' (Squire, 2013:50-51). The research relationship was a recurring source of reflection and required attentiveness and reflexivity (section 3.9) throughout the research process (Woodruffe-Burton, 2006).

### **3.9 RESEARCHER REFLEXIVITY**

As has been referred to previously, reflexivity should be an integral part of the research process with the role and position of the researcher being

transparent within the research methods and methodological approach. It should be acknowledged that my role and position as researcher was established prior to the research (section 1.2) as well as evolving during it. Creswell suggests that in narrative inquiry the researcher needs to be aware in particular of the impact their own personal and political narrative has on their role (2007). Insights into the researcher's own life through this process is a legitimate part of narrative inquiry (section 1.2). Glucksmann argues:

*'Close attention is paid to the dynamics of the research process and to the participation of the researcher in the construction of reality. The researcher's own responses and understandings, and the meanings it has for her, thus become integral components of the final product'* (1995:159).

Reflexivity requires an acknowledgement of the researcher's subjectivities and peculiar identities, as an individual and also an acknowledgement of the impact this inevitably has on the understanding and conclusions reached without challenging their legitimacy. Sankar and Gubrium argue that reflexivity therefore requires:

*'a heightened sense of self-awareness about the researcher's personal understandings, beliefs, prejudices and world view'* (1994:xi).

Making reflexivity explicit ensures the entire research process is open to scrutiny and strengthens the findings. Reflexivity therefore becomes essential to transparency and is described by Mies as *'a methodological and political opportunity'* (1993:68).

In order to ensure I remained aware of the impact I had on the study I have in practical terms used field notes to record my thoughts and observations (section 3.5) (Appendix Twelve). A rigorous and transparent application of the analytical process of thematic analysis (section 3.6) enhanced the reflexivity and the robust nature of the study. On occasions, I have discussed issues with my supervisors in order to develop appropriate strategies for managing potential challenges. An example of this is when I discussed with my supervisors the process of transcription and how to represent a northern dialect. As someone from the south there was a notable difference to my own expression and I was trying to avoid what Spence referred to as '*narrative smoothing*' (Spence, 1986, in Clandinin and Connelly, 2000:181).

Mensinga (2009) suggests that the stories or '*identity performances*' in narrative inquiry reflect the social norms that are negotiated between the researcher and the researched and this would to some degree shape how they are presented. The interaction between the researcher and the researched is also subject to scrutiny with Frost (2009) suggesting that the role of the researcher should be examined throughout the research process to make clear the influence it has at every stage from the way the interviews are conducted to the interpretation of the data.

### **3.10 CONCLUSION**

This chapter has outlined the methodology and methods that underpinned the study on which this thesis is based. Narrative inquiry informed by both



critical social research and feminist research underpinned my epistemological perspective and, as has been described, strongly influenced my choice of methods including focus groups and interviews for eliciting participants' narratives of experience. An account of the thematic analysis used to analyse the experiences of participants was provided signalling its compatibility with the theoretical perspective of the thesis and the research questions. I also highlighted the importance of ethical considerations, the researcher/participant relationship and the need for reflexivity to ensure that the findings reported on the basis of the study are robust, rigorous and credible.

## CHAPTER FOUR

# **Choosing to undertake the social work degree via a work-based learning route: factors influencing choices**

### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

Chapter four explores the first research question – *What factors influence students' decisions to undertake the social work degree via work-based learning routes?* Braun and Clarke's (2006) method of thematic analysis (section 3.6) provides an analytical framework for the identification of four themes in relation to this research question which are discussed in this chapter:

- *Social and educational backgrounds: considering the impact*
- *Current family contexts: affecting choices*
- *'Privileging the qualified voice': gaining recognition*
- *Work-based learning: choosing this route on the social work degree*

These themes identify social and occupational factors that shaped participants' decision to undertake the social work degree via a work-based learning route and how participants navigated the choices available to them.

Data extracts from 17 of the 20 participants are presented in this chapter (13 women and four men), nine of whom are from the national distance learning university programme and eight from the local face-to-face university programme. These extracts are presented in the form of narratives and comments on their experience with selected extracts from participants chosen for their vivid illustration of the respective themes (the full range of participants whose data maps against the themes can be seen in Figure 13). The final section presents Morag's story as a 'telling case' (Mitchell, 1984) providing a compelling illustration of how these themes coalesce in one person's narrative of experience.

## **4.2 SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUNDS: CONSIDERING THE IMPACT**

Social and educational backgrounds were consistently presented as factors influencing the decision to undertake the work-based learning degree by those participants who did not already have a degree prior to starting the social work programme. These factors were presented by participants as previous barriers to participation in higher education and one of the reasons for their participation as mature students. In contrast, none of the participants with previous degrees talked about their social and educational backgrounds in relation to their decision to undertake the work-based learning degree. All of the participants with prior degrees made references to their previous educational background but this was limited to either

comparisons between their first degree and their experience of being a work-based learner, or reference to being a graduate and their identity as a learner.

The data shows that early school experiences were perceived by participants as limiting aspirations and expectations and creating enduring identities as learners. Social backgrounds were presented by these participants as a context within which their own journey to higher education could be understood, signalling a family context within which participating in higher education was not an expectation. Participants go on to identify the work-based learning route to becoming qualified as offering a more accessible route into higher education.

When Donny talked about how he had chosen to do the social work degree he rooted his narrative in his social background. He began by explaining that his father, mother and sisters had left school and gone into work and there were no aspirations for further education:

*Donny: That was just the way it was within my family I suppose really and, and just crack on with making a living (Int. 1: 20.12.20120).*

Mary's narrative of her journey into higher education also started with her social background as a significant factor in shaping her journey into social care as a career and subsequently higher education. She describes growing up in a 'working class' family as the only girl with three brothers and feeling isolated:

*Mary: Me mam and dad divorced after many years of domestic violence ... And we were latch key kids you know ... we also lived in, in a very isolated village where everybody basically went to the local secondary school but*

we went to this catholic school so we had spent three quarters of an hour on a bus to get to the school. (Int. 1: 19.10.2012)

Mary recounts here a number of factors that she feels contributed to and compounded her social isolation as a child. The isolation she felt and the hardships and conflict she experienced within the family environment led her to look for something different, 'I hadn't took any qualifications at school ... I just wasn't interested, I didn't know what I wanted to do ... I just wanted out of my life that I was in at that time' (FG. 1: 16.6.2012). Mary explains how it was having children that initially offered her an escape route from her childhood hardships:

Mary: I wanted to escape my life so I got pregnant, not on purpose but I did get pregnant. I didn't use any protection and I got pregnant and I thought well I, I want to get out. I need to leave this house, I need me time and I just thought, and I can be a better mum than I've had my mam be to me. (Int. 1: 19.10.2012)

Mary here identifies the risks she took to escape an unhappy environment with motherhood offering an opportunity to find a more fulfilling life.

However, she goes on to talk about eventually feeling that family life for her was limited and problematic and she linked the challenges of her childhood with her subsequent marriage referring to this period in her life as 'jumping out of the frying pan and into the chip pan' (Int. 1: 19.10.2012) suggesting there was no reprieve. Once her children had been at school for several years and had become more independent Mary said she began to think 'but what do I do for me' (Int. 2: 13.8.2013). This next extract shows how she saw work as an opportunity for personal growth, to explore her identity and develop her sense of self that was more than and beyond her role within her family.

Mary: I didn't want just to be a housewife and mother. I wanted to develop my own sense of who I was really and I didn't feel as though I had that so that's when I, I looked for a route into some sort of job. (Int. 1: 19.10.2012)

Mary presented both her career and university as emancipatory and transformational, saying that she viewed them as opportunities, 'to develop my sense of self with who I am really and who I was' (Int. 1: 19.10.2012) a journey of developing understanding that continued during the social work degree. Once she entered into social care she said, 'I've never really looked back' (Int. 1: 19.10.2012). With the support and encouragement of her employer this led to further training opportunities and eventually secondment onto the social work degree.

Challenges in childhood also included early school experiences for participants. Data suggests that these experiences created a barrier to higher education by quelling aspirations and limiting opportunities to further participation in education. Lois for example, described herself as coming from a working class background and enjoying learning but felt that teachers had the power to limit the choices available to her regarding future pathways. She presents here a narrative of early educational experiences:

Lois: When we were at school we were **told** which class we were going to be in ... I can always remember sitting in science and saying to my teacher 'I really want to do the next exam in this cos I love science' and ... I can always remember him saying 'oh no, you'll never do that Lois, no, no you're this level'.

Lois's narrative of her school life provides the foundation for her subsequent description of the choices she felt she had and the barrier to higher education that it created for her. She goes on to say:

Lois: I think when I was at school they put you in that box in the level and even if you loved that subject you are never going to get out of that box no matter how hard you tried ... I would never ever have been able to go to university when I left school. (Int. 1: 9.10.2012)

For Lois, her experiences in school created a divide amongst the school population with higher education becoming the preserve of an academic elite 'people when I left school that went to University were the cream of the crop really. People like me never went to university' (Int. 1: 9.10.2012). Lois talked of this group as a select group to which you were either included or excluded according to whether teachers felt you fitted the profile of a 'traditional student' in higher education (section 2.2.1). For Lois this appeared to present a barrier to participation, a non-negotiable and seemingly 'permanent' categorisation which left her feeling that higher education was not a matter of choice for everyone.

Lois also identified her family, as well as her teacher, as influencing her expectations of education and aspirations as a child. Her description of her parents' attitudes to education suggests a perception of post compulsory education as 'not for them' with work being the preferred option over education:

Lois: They left school, they went to the factory they wouldn't have thought about education. Education to them was just you done it, you got out, you went to work. (Int. 1: 9.10.2012)

Lois's social and educational background circumscribed her aspirations as a young adult and it was over 30 years before she re-engaged with education. She then lacked confidence and struggled to believe she could achieve in higher education, *'I would never ever have imagined when I left school that I could do this and I know I'm 52 and it's took me this long'* (Int. 1: 9.10.2012). Lois here indicates the fundamental challenge to her existing sense of identity that participation in higher education presents. Higher education presents opportunities but not without challenges and required transitions that would impact upon her identity as a learner. Talking about graduating and the journey she has had on the degree Lois goes on to say, *'wow this is me and I've done it'* (Int. 2: 20.9.2013) suggesting that higher education had been transformative and presented an opportunity to disrupt existing identities.

For other participants who did not already have a degree, school was also seen as limiting their opportunities. For some it was the lack of achievement at school that contributed to identities as learners (Thunborg et al, 2013) that presented as a barrier to further participation in education. Like other participants, Diane talked about how she had left school with a limited number of qualifications and initially *'had no more expectations other than really just work in a factory'* (Int. 2: 11.7.2013). School appears to have quelled her aspirations and limited her expectations. Laura remembered being labelled at school as a non-achiever, *'teachers and other peers, telling you from sort of nine-ish that you're a bit, a bit stupid'* (Int. 1: 9.10.12), and believed this impacted upon her academic confidence and also shaped her



employment opportunities. Laura presents a narrative of leaving school and her career development:

Laura: Typical girl of my time, came out of school and went right into child care in the caring professions where you didn't need qualifications then and just sort of played with qualifications, NVOs and things until I had enough to have a job with a higher status than shelf packing or shop work but not professional, teetering. (FG. 1: 16.6.2012)

Her experience as a 'typical girl of my time', signals a connection between her personal narrative and care being a gendered profession (Perry and Cree, 2003; Furness, 2007; Moriarty and Murray, 2007). Laura found school 'very difficult' (FG. 1: 16.6.2012) leading to a subsequent ambivalent relation with education. She entered a gendered career which did not initially require qualifications with a subsequent journey through occupational qualifications that did not appear to be a planned strategy, 'just sort of played with qualifications' (FG. 1: 16.6.2012). Her experiences of occupational development and training, for example NVQs led to what has been referred to as a 'turning point' (O'Shea, 2014:140) (section 2.3.3) in that they encouraged her to consider higher qualifications and the social work degree. She talks of being, 'not professional, teetering' (FG. 1: 16.6.2012) on the edge of a professional career suggesting she felt that having undertaken some work-based qualifications she had approached a boundary with the two positions of 'non-professional' and 'professional' being situated on either side. She subsequently says that work-based qualifications 'gave me a bit of confidence to find out who I really was and investigate things a bit more' (Int. 1: 9.10.2012) with the social work degree offering Laura a vehicle for overcoming the barrier to further career development. This suggests a combination of both personal and occupational motivation for undertaking

the social work degree demonstrating the complex and extended nature of Laura's journey towards higher education having left school without qualifications.

These data extracts illustrate how participants perceive family and educational contexts as creating barriers to further participation in education reinforcing a perception of higher education as remote and exclusive. Subsequent choices in occupation were limited and for some led to gendered work-based routes into the caring services. Personal narratives are also embedded within understandings of social systems including higher education being an elite system and the caring professions being gendered occupations. Understandings of higher education as an elite and inaccessible system shaped the choices available to participants and thereby the meanings attributed to their own experiences.

#### **4.3 CURRENT FAMILY CONTEXTS: AFFECTING CHOICES**

This section explores the significance of current family contexts and the choices and challenges that this presents when deciding to undertake the work-based learning degree, a prevalent theme featuring within 15 of the 20 participants' narratives of their decision making. Whilst both men and women discussed children and family at some point, there were gendered differences in the way they talked about how this impacted upon this decision. The data from 13 of the 15 women participants in this study suggested that children and family played a part in their decision to

undertake the social work degree with a focus on *if*, *when* and *how* the degree could be undertaken. The two remaining women did not have children. Diane when talking about the timing of her undertaking the social work degree stated that when her children were younger she felt unable to take on the additional commitment of the programme requirements:

Diane: I would've felt really sort of torn not being able to give my kids the time that I felt they needed' (Int. 1: 17.10.12)

All five men in the study had children but only one included the contexts of children and family in their narratives of decision making with a predominant focus on *how* he would manage the competing requirements of family and the programme as opposed to his role of father influencing the decision whether to undertake the degree at all.

The data extracts in this theme reflect various stages of family life and how these stages impacted upon the decisions made by participants. Petra, who became a mother in her final year of her degree, was one of two women participants, the other being Valerie, who talked about their decision to delay having a family in order to undertake the degree. She was very keen to gain a professional qualification in order to be on a par with other professionals in her place of work, 'I really felt outqualified' (Int. 1: 19.12.2012). In the following extract, Petra appears to perceive a choice between undertaking the degree in order to develop her career, or having a baby and states how she presents this decision to her husband:

Petra: You know (delaying having a baby) is hard to ask of someone that is looking forward to having some family and we were two years married

already and I think he was hoping to start soon and so it was really putting that family on hold for a few years and ... I think that was one of the sacrifices we had to make. (Int. 1: 19.12.2012)

**Petra presents undertaking the degree as a choice for her between professional advancement and motherhood, a complex decision she negotiated with her husband deciding the responsibilities of motherhood were incompatible with undertaking a social work degree. This is also evident in Valerie's comment which highlights the complexity of the decision due to straddling multiple domains:**

Valerie: I knew deep in my heart that to be a good parent and to be a good student and to be a good employee I couldn't do all three at the same time, I knew that and I knew my limitations and I think I probably underestimated my limitations with respect to being a good employee, a good wife, a good daughter, a good student. There was no way I was going to add a, a family into that into that dichotomy. (Int. 1:19.10.2012)

**Valerie talks about her expectations of performing multiple roles in a particular way 'being a good employee, a good wife, a good daughter, a good student' and positions them in opposition to each other, 'that dichotomy' (sic) suggesting these roles were diametrically opposed and in constant tension. For other participants in the study being a 'good parent' remained a source of conflict and tension whilst they were students, with women participants who already had children talking about the need to juggle roles and make compromises as mothers (section 6.2.2).**

Parenting as a student created conflicts for both men and women with the data from the men suggesting they more straightforwardly legitimised their studies as career development. Keith became a father for the first time at

the very beginning of the degree at the local face-to-face university. When asked about his motivation to apply for the work-based learning route on the social work degree Keith initially talked about role recognition, security and remuneration as the main reasons for undertaking the degree. He also talked about his new role as a father and how he would integrate this role with his studies. His narrative of his decision making, which included family and other factors, suggests that the decision was complex but it was not a choice of whether or not to undertake the degree as it was for a number of the women participants but of which route would be most appropriate to his developing needs:

*Keith: I think probably the major thing was becoming a dad ... I thought how can I possibly have a newborn baby and have distance learning on top of work as well. (Int. 1: 17.10.2102)*

It was the choice of route on the social work degree programme that was critical in order that he could manage his studies along with his new family commitments. He opted for the degree at the local face-to-face university, which involved full time study from year two, rather than a distance learning route as he believed the challenges of managing a caseload as well as a programme of study as a distance learner were unfeasible for him at that time.

Being a parent impacted upon participants' decision to become a student in a number of ways. Like Diane previously, the timing of Hilary's decision to undertake the degree as a mother of three was determined by the ages of her children and how this would impact on the role within the family.

Hilary presents a narrative that explains how making the decision changed over time:

Hilary: I was still a working parent ... So when they were younger there was no way I could even have considered doing the degree because my children were my priority and work was secondary and although my children are still my priority I think, as they get older ... and they start moving out of home, what's going to be left for me? (FG. 2: 20.6.2012)

Hilary describes the challenge of working and being a mother, signalling that her role as a mother was given primacy with her children's independence providing a time for a re-evaluation of roles. This was not without its challenges as she recognised the demands placed on work-based learners with families, 'you have to be able to manage a family, you have to be able to do essays, study and then work full-time sometimes' (Int. 1: 1.10.2012). Hilary's decision to undertake the degree was complex and appeared to be based upon a complicated calculation of several factors - the requirements of academic study, financial implications as a wage-earning parent and how she could manage her family commitments. It is when demands on her time in her role as mother subsided that she began to consider her own needs, 'what's going to be left for me?'.

For Diane, being a student meant managing family finances on a reduced income. For work-based learners being supported by their employers involved one of a variety of arrangements ranging from secondment, with a variable impact on salary, to being self-funded. Diane was seconded and describes in the following extract how she felt about the impact of a depleted income on her children:

Diane: I knew I could pay the bills and everything else would be able to be paid but I wasn't going to be able to say 'yes you can go to the pictures' or 'there's some money' ... It was me feeling guilty that because I was a single parent I wasn't going to be able to give them, in that period ... the things that I would want to give them. (Int. 2: 11.7.2013)

**Guilt at the financial hardship that had been imposed on the family as a result of her becoming a student was exacerbated for Diane by being a single parent. Financial hardship was an aspect of being a student that participants were not able to keep hidden from family members and sometimes were explicitly negotiated with families in order to be given the space to become a student. Diane prepared her family for the potential financial hardship and found her children very supportive, 'well that's fine because we can help' (Int. 2: 11.7.2013).**

**The data also shows that the flexibility of a work-based learning route influenced participants' decision as to whether it was feasible to undertake the social work degree, as the flexibility of the route made it possible for them to manage their family commitments. Rebecca had undertaken the national distance learning university programme and explained why a distance learning programme enabled her to manage her studies and still accommodate the needs of her daughter's medical condition. She describes what she wanted from this route of study:**

Rebecca: A bit more ownership on the study route as well as to be able to fit it around Eliza ... So for me to do this, as a family it had to be workable it had to have not too much a big an impact so this seemed the best option. (Int. 1:25.3.2013)

Rebecca positions herself as a student within the family context and explains how the needs of the family as a whole were the critical factor in deciding how to do the degree. Interestingly Rebecca signals the importance of a sense of control over her studies, 'ownership' was an important consideration in the decision to embark on further study. Having a flexible programme of study also seems to have enabled her to maintain the status quo within the family.

For Laura, the maintenance of relationships and established familial routines was also important. The lack of financial support from her employers initially meant that to participate in the social work degree meant she needed to bear the financial cost herself to begin with, securing a secondment in Year 2. Having left school with a negative identity as a learner meant that undertaking the social work degree seemed to create uncertainty for her and she proceeded with caution, 'I didn't really know what it was going to offer' (Int. 1: 19.10.2012), whilst carefully managing family relationships and limiting the impact on family life. Studying on the national distance learning degree meant that she could maintain her job, financial security and independence within her marriage:

Laura: 'We're quite a modern partnership, me and my husband. We have our own money, our own bank accounts but shared bills and although we could have made that work on one wage I felt, I feel like I would have lost my independence and needed to rely on somebody. (Int. 1: 9.2012)

Laura's comment here emphasises the importance to her of maintaining the status quo in her relationship with her husband which provided her with independence rather than trading an opportunity for career development via



the social work degree with financial dependence. Laura described how the national distance learning programme, with its blended learning approach was also appealing as an academic route providing her with an opportunity to venture into higher education without fully committing to it and manage the uncertainties of a new role that she identified in a staged way:

Laura: It allowed me to keep my job so that if I wasn't cut out for it academically I had something to fall back on. It worked round my life, well, not as much as I thought it was going to originally but allowed me to still parent Connor to a good standard and work in the evening and the resources fit with me, you know the way they're presented. (FG. 1: 16.6.2012)

The design of the programme delivery minimised conflict with other roles enabling the family status quo to be maintained by allowing her to 'mould (the programme) round everything else' (Int. 1: 19.10.2012) rather than having to commit totally to a degree programme with accompanying academic uncertainties. This route also enabled her to maintain her identity as a 'good mother' in the way she wanted to without her sense of her standard of parenting being compromised.

Lois the mother of two adult children, the elder a daughter and the youngest a son who has was profoundly disabled, foregrounds her role as a mother in her narrative of family life. The following data extract explains how limited Lois found this identity when her son left school:

Lois: I haven't got a life here now, all I'm doing is waiting for my kids coming home from school ... I felt so demoralised because all I was doing ... all I felt I was Martin's mum, not even Justine's mum, but Martin's mum

because Justine was on the backburner as well because of Martin (Int. 1: 9.10.2012).

Her experience of being a mother to her son had dominated her identity and her appointment as a school governor became a pivotal and empowering 'turning point' (O'Shea, 2014:140) (section 2.3.3). She described the importance of the encouragement she received from the headteacher to **undertake this role**, '(she) was fantastic. I honestly think without her I would probably still be 'Martin's mum''. (Int. 1: 9.10.2012). **When this school role came to an end another opportunity arose and Lois secured a job as a Family Support Worker with the local authority. The social work degree offered her the opportunity of occupational advancement. But it was the personal opportunities that higher education represented that particularly motivated Lois, as her narrative highlights:**

Lois: I had been a family worker for ten years and I got to the point of thinking 'is this it, is this me', and really I wanted to prove to myself that I could do something 'cos I've never studied since I was at school ... I got a divorce and I thought 'that might not be me, the person I thought I was and wouldn't it be good to be somebody else' (laughs) not *be* somebody else but explore who you are really rather than settle for 'this is me, I'm divorced, I'm 40 odd'. (FG. 1: 16.6.2012)

**Lois saw her role within her family as defining and limiting her identity. When posing the question 'is this it, is this me?' higher education presented an opportunity to 'disrupt' her existing identity. This opportunity came at a time when she was seeking personal development rather than solely professional development 'I think I done the social work degree more for me rather than actually work' (FG. 1: 16.6.2012). Lois's comment suggests that**

she needed encouragement to apply for the work-based learning social work degree and that this came from a friend who, recognising that the competing demands of carer and mother were waning, said to her 'if you don't apply you're never going to do this, because this is your window 'cos Martin's gone to college, so you can' (Int. 1: 9.10.2012). In her narrative Lois appears to have envisaged many barriers to entering higher education but identified a number of factors coalescing, particularly when her son was less dependent on her that presented a single window of opportunity to be seized upon.

Lillian, like Lois, was one of the 11 women who had children and one of the seven of this subgroup who found that higher education offered an opportunity to challenge identities that were limiting. Lillian secured a secondment to undertake the work-based learning route on the social work degree at the local face-to-face university after several years of applying. Her narrative of family life was interwoven with her working life. This began with her career in the army being replaced with marriage and children. She describes the loss of her occupational role 'my career, that I thought I was going to have in the army was taken away' (Int. 2: 13.8.2013). Following the loss of her career and an established and valued identity as a worker, she experienced a 'turning point' (O'Shea, 2014:140) and a re-evaluation of her individual identity that had been obscured by her roles within her family as the following comments signal:

Lillian: I've just wanted to get back to, to be me ... I've been a wife and mother and a daughter and, that was it. I wondered, 'is this going to be it' and what was I going to do once the kids left home so I just needed that

identity to identify me as an individual ... I think that was where I was trying to get back to you know by doing the degree. (Int. 2: 13.8.2013)

Like Lois, after her children became more independent, Lillian chose to undertake the social work degree to challenge her existing identities and **reclaim an identity as an individual**, 'I think it was about me proving that I could do something else other than be a mom and a wife and a housewife' (Int. 2: 13.8.2013). She articulates here a desire to establish a legitimate identity as an individual beyond the family and domestic domain. Work and higher education were vehicles for facilitating this and the social work degree, and secondment onto the work-based learning route at the local face-to-face university, provided the opportunity.

The data in this theme suggest that the women appeared to position themselves at the core of family life and presented their decision to undertake the social work degree as complex and conflicted, as offering opportunities but also accompanied by uncertainty and having to overcome barriers. All of the women participants with children at some point in their data gave priority to their family responsibilities suggesting a salient identity embedded in the context of family. Undertaking the social work degree was not described by the men in ways that suggested it was a choice between family and career development. For all those participants, both men and women with young children, and for some women with independent children, the decision to undertake the degree continued to be accompanied by tensions and conflict between roles. For women participants, this was also conversely viewed as an opportunity that was both emancipating and empowering.

#### **4.4           ‘PRIVILEGING THE QUALIFIED VOICE’: GAINING RECOGNITION**

The participants in the study all worked alongside other qualified, as well as unqualified practitioners both within their organisations and other partner agencies. Of the 20 participants in this study 18 identified being unqualified as a factor influencing their decision to undertake the social work degree, positioning themselves as different in relation to a qualified staff. These participants foregrounded lack of status in the workplace alongside qualified staff and/or financial remuneration as motivating factors in pursuing a professional qualification. This was alongside the desire for recognition of their competence and capabilities when they perceived their current roles and responsibilities to be equivalent to their qualified colleagues. The data in this section suggests that there is also a lack of recognition afforded practitioners with relevant experiential understanding which participants found undermining.

In the third focus group a discussion between participants regarding the differences between qualified and unqualified staff signalled a '*privileging of the qualified voice*' (Watts and Waraker, 2008:106) and highlighted the commonality of experience between Brian, Donny and Keith. All three had considerable practice experience in social work agencies and two of them, Brian and Keith, had worked together. They all foregrounded recognition of practice and status at work as goal orientated motivating factors in undertaking a social work degree. The following extract suggests that they were frustrated with their organisational workforce structures that

perpetuated the '*qualifications premium*' (Watts and Waraker, 2008:106).

The degree was presented by all three men as an opportunity to achieve recognition and status both within and outside of their organisations and to establish themselves on an 'equal' footing to their qualified colleagues:

Brian: A deeper motivation for both Keith and I was the fact that we were support workers, well still are, but we were doing exactly the same job as the qualified workers both in high risk cases, the same level of responsibility, but getting paid £4,000-£5,000 less than what they were ... and thought I'm not going to waste any more time, I'm going to do the social work degree, hopefully I'll, I'll get it because I know it's, it's respected currency, you know.

Donny: It is, it is recognition of the work that you're doing, because I've found that, like yourselves, I was working doing the same as, if not more than some of the Social Workers within the teams that I've been in and obviously for a lot less pay and a lot less recognition and you just, you just get to the point and think 'well I should be up there doing that, you know I should be, I should be working and saying that I'm a Social Worker 'cos I'm doing that job' but I'm not actually recognised as that ... and for me that's what it was it was like a personal achievement that I wanted to gain.

Keith: It's far more about that than it is about the money because you can go to other (a practice context) be equally paid. But very much about that thing of you're doing a job that you know is equal to the job that is being done around you ... it is very much about that recognition ... you know you're not getting the recognition for that and you feel like well actually I'm worth that and I should, should go for that.

(FG. 3: 17.7.2012)

This extract from the third focus group highlights the men's frustration at the differentiation they observe between the qualified and unqualified staff and their perception of these positions as in opposition to one another. Brian,

Donny and Keith all compared their roles with qualified staff as being commensurate but not recognised as such. They highlight the desire for their contribution as experienced practitioners to be equally valued to that of qualified practitioners, with Brian summarising this, *'we were doing exactly the same job as the qualified workers'*. Whilst it is normal practice for qualified practitioners to be remunerated due to their professional qualifications, the perception of inequity by the three participants based on their comparative current occupational responsibilities was a key motivating factor for all three men. Brian and Donny associated this with financial recompense to bring them in line with qualified staff whilst Keith's comment stressed that financial reward was not the primary motivating factor for him although he later referred to feeling exploited with the use of the metaphor *'they'd more than got their moneys' worth'* (FG. 3: 17.7.2012).

For Brian, status within the context of work was central to his narrative of motivation to undertake the degree. His career in social services began following redundancy from his job in heavy industry resulting in a loss of acquired status:

Brian: I had a shift of 22 people who worked for me. I was responsible for the health and safety, productivity, everything, and then I had a change of career and I've had to fit in with where I could slot into the hierarchy within social care and you could call it a bit of a chip on my shoulder related to my past experience and my past status and to lose that and to be surrounded by other people who have this higher status than yourself' (FG. 3: 17.7.2012).

Brian appeared to struggle with the transition in roles when the status he had built up through his career in industry was not transferable. Gaining the

professional qualification was, he felt, the only way to regain that desired status and equal standing with qualified staff, crossing the divide and closing the differentiation gap was a matter of pride:

Brian: So I thought well I need that, I need the professional recognition for my own pride so I could be looked at as an equal within the service and not as a second-class citizen. (Int. 1: 31.1.2013)

The '*privileging of the qualified voice*' (Watts and Waraker, 2008:106) appears to be experienced by Brian as demeaning to him as an experienced practitioner. Having gained status in his previous career and demonstrated the skills he felt were commensurate with this previous role his experience and contribution now lacked value and recognition compared to other practitioners some of whom did not have a social work qualification and therefore, for Brian, lacked relevant credentials:

Brian: You could walk into the service with the teaching qualification and you're classed as a professionally qualified person so you automatically had a higher salary ... even when I'd had almost 12 years in youth justice. (FG. 3: 17.7.2012).

The benefits of a professional qualification, including the critical application of knowledge and skills to practice, were not recognised by Brian. The lesser weighting attached to practice experience versus a qualification was prevalent in the data from other participants who also foregrounded their status and credibility amongst colleagues within their organisations. The following extract is from Valerie who was in a managerial post and keen to maintain her position within her organisation. She describes here how she felt that the degree would enhance her standing:



Valerie: I was finding it increasingly difficult to be confident in challenging other professionals particularly social work professionals, in respect to child protection practice which fundamentally at that time was very much my job. And there was often comments made, 'well, the (title of her post) does not have a professional qualification' ... the social work qualification would give me ... more confidence and credibility in challenging other professionals. (Int. 1: 19.10.2012)

**Valerie felt her position within the organisation was undermined by her lack of a professional qualification and her desire for legitimacy and credibility amongst colleagues were her main motivations for her decision to undertake the social work degree. Donny also wanted credibility but for him it was also with service users who he believed were persuaded by credentials:**

Donny: I just want to be able to actually say that to somebody and for them not to have to worry about questioning whether they are going to get a decent service from my team because they think that a qualified worker's gonna be better than someone that's not. (Int. 1:20.12.2012)

**Reflecting back on her experience of crossing the boundary from 'unqualified' to 'qualified' practitioner, Rebecca's experience provided a contrast to this perception of difference. She recognised the difference in how others perceived her and the impact this had on the renegotiation of relationships:**

Rebecca: I remember going to talk to the families that I was working with to say, 'I'm qualified' and they were, 'oh, okay', and they were like, 'well how will it be different'. (Int. 2: 9.7.2013)

**This extract highlights some of the differences in the meanings attached to the positions of 'qualified' and 'unqualified'. Whilst she felt that it had little**

impact on the way she was perceived by service users, it did have an impact on relationships with colleagues:

Rebecca: Having the word 'qualified' next to you seems to have opened you up into conversations that previously you weren't allowed to be part of. (Int. 2: 9.7.2013)

Rebecca's extract signals the privileging of qualified status and how this afforded access to different relationships with colleagues. Whilst some participants were cynical of the privileges of a qualified position within teams, others focused on the personal benefits.

This section has demonstrated that the credibility associated with a professional qualification is, for work-based learners, a highly valued commodity in social work practice. '*Privileging the qualified voice*' (Watts and Waraker, 2008:106) however, is not without its tensions for aspirant work-based learners who recognise a dichotomy between qualified and unqualified workers. As unqualified workers, their credibility as experienced practitioners is undermined due to the juxtaposition of 'operational competence', based on the workplace, and 'academic competence', based on knowledge (Watts and Waraker, 2008). The data in this theme indicate that the participants felt that a professional qualification would add legitimacy and status in a profession where in its recent history credentialisation gives claim to a professional identity (Beddoe, 2011).

## **4.5 WORK-BASED LEARNING: CHOOSING THIS ROUTE ON THE SOCIAL WORK DEGREE**

Work-based learners on social work degrees are usually seconded or supported by their employers to undertake the degree, a long-established practice in social work (section 2.2.3). Employers offer a secondment to employees following a process of application. Successful applicants have usually been in practice within the organisation for a minimum period during which it would be anticipated that the employee will have developed skills and understanding of their role and responsibilities. The terms of a secondment frequently includes being 'tied in' to an organisation for a period following qualification. For those work-based learners who are not formally seconded, agreements are sometimes reached with their employers in order to facilitate their attendance on the programme such as career breaks, renegotiated hours and/or securing practice learning opportunities (section 3.4.1).

The benefits of a work-based learning route in higher education was a highly prevalent and consistent theme across the whole data set with all participants talking about the opportunities available to them via a work-based learning route. Participants identified a variety of reasons for choosing this particular route on the social work degree including how it limited the financial, employment and social risks that a traditional full time route may pose. For some participants work-based learning routes in social work education presented the only opportunity to develop their career. For Holly, being seconded on the work-based route was the only option for becoming qualified, with her employer, *'paying for something I couldn't afford*

to do myself' (Int. 1: 22.10.2012). This motivation was especially evident at a time of redundancies and austerity measures. Other participants also felt that there were seemingly no other realistic and manageable options for progression. Sonia was seconded by a local authority as a manager with many years of experience in social care. Whilst she had the necessary qualification for her existing role at the time she was also aware of impending cuts in services and in an organisational climate characterised by restructuring Sonia felt vulnerable as the following narrative suggests:

*Sonia: I was stuck for a number of years and I think I needed that push and then I think that push came probably when they started closing some of the centres and I thought, 'oh my God, where am I going to end up. What's going to happen with us?' (Int. 1: 19.12.2012)*

At a time of growing financial uncertainty for employees in public services the opportunity to expand options was particularly important for Sonia offering her financial security whilst qualifying, 'for me it was like the financial side because I was gonna take ... a big drop in money' (Int. 1: 19.12.2012).

Sonia like others remained on the payroll whilst undertaking the degree although her pay was reduced for a limited period. However, this meant that she could maintain what she felt was a reasonable standard of living for herself and her family whilst attending university. Leaving work also meant the loss of a practice context within which Sonia was embedded and meant uncertainty about the post she would return to following qualification. The decision to undertake the degree for Sonia was therefore complex and accompanied by risks to her standard of living and future employment.

Work-based learning routes also offered other participants security as the political and financial climate was seen to impact upon social work services. Job insecurity as an unqualified member of staff was a real concern. Participants assumed that undertaking the social work degree, and gaining a professional qualification would be accompanied by a more secure future. Laura referred to under-achievement in school signalling a lack of academic confidence when entering higher education, 'academically I'm not up to this at all' (FG. 1: 16.6.2012). The work-based learning route meant she could keep her post whilst venturing into higher education:

Laura: Every other route I'd explored I would have had to give up my job and start on a full-time degree course ... It was a big incentive not to have to lose my job cos I didn't know if I was going to finish the degree, I didn't know what work I would get again. (Int. 1: 9.10.2012)

The work-based learning route with the national distance learning university enabled Laura to manage the personal, social, financial and employment risks associated with becoming a student by not having to fully commit to study with this route offering her the opportunity to 'dip my toe in the water' (Int. 2: 19.9.2013). Becoming a student suggested risks to established identities which is highlighted by Laura, 'I never wanted (being a student) to be the only thing I was, at the risk of losing something else' (Laura: Int. 2: 19.9.2013). The transition into an unfamiliar environment created uncertainty and insecurity for Laura and she wanted a route that provided exit points if she felt the risks were untenable.

Laura was one of the three participants who were not seconded from the beginning of the programme. To secure a secondment meant undergoing

an exacting process of application with employers. This process however, proved helpful allowing some participants to gauge the support for their application from managers rather than applying independently to university and risking rejection. Brian's narrative highlights the process and how this made him feel:

Brian: We had to ... pass an interview with head of children's services so any doubts that I had about whether I was capable of getting through the course were kind of vetted by my employer first so with them thinking I was a suitable candidate I suppose that gave me a little bit of confidence to think 'well yeah they should know, all the time they put other people through, they must have a reasonable success rate in terms of their screening'. (FG. 3: 17.7.2012)

Brian, like some of the other participants, lacked academic confidence and affirmation from his organisation through these internal procedures was evidence that his managers felt he had the necessary potential to succeed making this route into participation in higher education less daunting.

One of the main reasons for undertaking the degree for a number of the participants was the improved prospects to extend their practice with a broader or different range of roles and responsibilities. For some this was sometimes combined with the hope that the degree would result in improved flexibility and would improve their employment opportunities and choices.

Sonia suggested that for her 'it was a qualification that was almost like a licence to practice' (Int. 1: 19.12.2012). The work-based learning route provided Keith with a route that met a range of needs. On the one hand, it enabled him to maintain his financial commitments whilst undertaking a qualification that on the other hand offered different options for developing his career and

expand his employment options in the caring service. Keith described what he hoped the social work degree would offer:

*Keith: that professional status will hopefully allow us to like you know, scour the newspaper and think, 'Ooh, actually that looks quite interesting and I'll do that' (Int. 1: 17.10.2012).*

Similarly, for Carl the work-based learning route provided a flexible pathway to occupational progression reflecting Osborne et al's category of 'careerist' in their typology of motivation (2004). Carl had considerable social care experience and after many years of attempting to procure a secondment and undertaking elements of the degree independently he eventually secured support from his employer midway through the degree. The degree opened up new employment opportunities:

*Carl: It means I can progress. I can apply for jobs in other teams that I know I can do ... I'm stuck in a rut as an assessing officer and I can't go anywhere else. I can't progress. I can't progress to senior practitioner cos I don't have that qualification. I can't progress to team manager because I don't have that piece of paper. (Int. 1: 15.1.2012)*

Carl identifies the limitations of unqualified practice and the ceiling to progression that he believes he had encountered due to a lack of an appropriate professional qualification. Like other participants Carl was unable to commit fully to study due to the financial implications and therefore the work-based learning route was his only option to professional qualification as it allowed him to continue to earn whilst studying. Other participants, like Carl, had spent many years pursuing opportunities for secondment. Finding opportunities to develop their careers required commitment, perseverance and resilience whilst waiting for the support of

employers to materialise. Anna, who also experienced financial barriers to participation, was resolute in her ambition to undertake the degree and capitalise on the opportunity of secondment as is evident in the following narrative:

*Anna: I've tried to get on the course for 10 years. I've applied three times. I've got accepted the first two times but again for financial reasons I couldn't go onto the course, that was the first time. The second time I got a place and at the time managers were getting the secondment so I didn't get it then so third time this has been I suppose the right time and a good opportunity. (FG. 3: 17.7.2012)*

Anna's perseverance is evident in the number of attempts over a decade to secure support from her employers to undertake the social work degree. This was also evident in the narratives of other participants suggesting limited alternative options to realise their ambitions required their pursuit of secondment from their employer. This involves work-based learners making a series of often complex decisions including the recalculation of the risks (social, financial and occupational) associated with entry into higher education at various stages in their lives and over prolonged periods of time.

The thematic analysis presented so far in this chapter has provided extracts from 16 participants illustrating the four themes in relation to the first research question - social and educational backgrounds: considering the impact; current family contexts: affecting choices; 'privileging the qualified voice': gaining recognition and work-based learning: choosing this route on the social work degree. These data extracts provide compelling examples from a large proportion of the participants to illustrate the prevalence and



consistency of the themes. The following case study illustrates how the four themes discussed in the previous section coalesce in Morag's narrative of experience thereby providing a 'telling case' (Mitchell, 1984) (section 3.6). This case study provides a holistic illustration of her experience and the difficult choices for her as a work-based learner undertaking the social work degree. As such it provides a coherence to the narrative of her decision to undertake the degree.

#### **4.6 MORAG'S STORY – '*To new people I was just a family support worker*'**

Morag was 40 years of age and had 25 years of experience in social care when she was seconded onto the work-based learning route of the social work degree at the local face-to-face university. Her narrative of experience relating to her decision to undertake the degree drew upon familial, educational and occupational factors over a period of three decades prior to starting the programme. When asked what factors influenced her decision to undertake the work-based learning route into social work education Morag provided a family background based upon social class and working class trades 'we are a typical working class family ... Everybody else seems to be pretty hands on with painters and decorators and things like that. (Int. 1: 19.12.2012). Entering higher education at the age of 40, and as the 'first in the family' to gain a degree, higher education brought with it an opportunity for Morag to acquire status, 'the first person to get a degree in the family is a massive thing' (Int. 1: 19.12.2012).

There was no family tradition of higher education and her marriage at the age of 18 had halted Morag's continuation in education. At times domestic responsibilities had been a barrier to further participation although higher education had remained an aspiration fuelled in part by her father's encouragement. When education was perceived by Morag as accessible, defined by her ability to maintain family responsibilities, she engaged with it, 'so I literally drop the kids off at school and then run over the road to College' (Int. 1: 19.12.2012). When her children were, young participation was unsustainable with her stating that she, 'couldn't afford to continue academically ... because I had the kids and we just bought a house' (Int. 2: 11.7.2013). For many years Morag apportioned primacy to her family commitments with familial and financial risks continuing to be barriers to further development, 'so for years and years I've sort of put it off and put it off. (Int. 2: 11.7.2013) although higher education remained an aspiration which endured.

The financial risks of undertaking the degree led her to adopt a more strategic approach to work in order to maximise the opportunities for a secondment. When she was made redundant from a care role she undertook agency work and eventually found a position in an organisation that seconded permanent staff onto the social work degree, 'I hung on and hung on in an agency position until a permanent position came up' (Int. 1: 19.12.2012). The possession of a formal qualification offered Morag more status within the workforce. Whilst she had already acquired status in her workplace this was bestowed upon her as a result of her extensive experience in her role, 'I had status within the office but that was through

experience and people knowing me but to new people I was just a family support worker.' (Int. 2: 11.7.2013). As she approached 40 she was very aware of young newly qualified social workers having a more privileged position within her workplace. Morag portrayed experience and qualification as opposing commodities and believed a 'qualifications premium' (Watts and Waraker, 2008:106) dichotomised the workforce, 'I've always sort of felt it that they're the 'qualifieds' and I'm the 'unqualified' of the group (Int. 1: 19.12.2012). Status was also relational for Morag and her motivation to undertake the degree was fuelled by her position within the workforce hierarchy, 'doing the degree was always about becoming a social worker and getting that status within the office ... because I wanted to be like everybody else (Int. 2: 11.7.2013). When she qualified her sense of achievement and transformation was keenly felt. She describes how important her new status was and how she felt when walking into the office as a qualified professional, 'I can remember thinking ... 'I'm actually the same as you now'' (Int. 2: 11.7.2013).

This case study illustrates the challenges Morag experienced in undertaking the social work degree and the difficult choices she had to make, a journey that was marked with narratives of discord between aspirations and opportunities. With resilience and perseverance Morag eventually secured a place in higher education but some of these challenges continued during her journey in higher education.

## **4.7 CONCLUSION**

The four of themes in this chapter have responded to the first research question - *What factors influence students' decisions to undertake the social work degree via work-based learning routes.* Caddell and Cannell (2011) suggest, people choose to study at points of change or desired change in their lives. Data in this study suggests that choosing to undertake the social work degree can be fuelled by layers of both personal and occupational choices and motivations creating multifaceted and protracted decisions to enter higher education.

Sometimes participants made a distinction between undertaking the social work degree per se, and the work-based learning route in particular. The reasons that they identified the work-based learning route as a specific choice was that it was the only financial option available to them, it was the expected route in their organisation and it allowed participants to maintain their position at work and posed less of a risk socially, financially or academically. Sometimes the distinction between particular routes was made less clear by participants with the focus on the broader opportunities that either having a degree and/or entering higher education would provide. These opportunities were both professional as well as personal and were potentially transformative in a number of ways.

This chapter also highlights barriers to higher education influenced by early childhood experiences reflecting structural inequalities (Bourdieu, 1991; Reay, 1998; Burke, 2012). Merrill (2012) suggests that there are particular challenges for working class aspirant students due to socio economic

factors and the cultural and symbolic capital of universities perpetuating inequalities (Davey, 2009). For some participants, family and educational backgrounds signalled a lack of the required cultural capital for higher education. These factors were identified only by the participants in this study without prior degrees. Whilst it could be argued that the 30% of participants who already had a degree already had the cultural capital, barriers to their continued participation existed due to family and financial commitments. In this context work-based learning routes still provided an opportunity for them to engage in a programme for professional qualification. The data also highlights gender as impacting upon participants' decisions to undertake the degree, the timing of this decision and the consideration of family roles and responsibilities. For women, whose identities were embedded within the domestic and family domain finding an 'acceptable' space to be a student was particularly challenging.

This chapter has considered the first stage in the trajectory of participants' experiences in relation to the work-based learning social work degree, that of the decision to undertake it. The following chapter considers the next stage in the trajectory analysing the educational experiences of participants whilst undertaking the degree.

## CHAPTER FIVE

# **Undertaking the social work degree: the educational journey of work- based learners**

### **5.1 INTRODUCTION**

Chapter four explored the factors influencing the participants' decisions to undertake a social work degree via a work-based learning route. This chapter moves to the next stage of the chronological trajectory of student experience focusing on the second research question - *How do students experience the educational journey?* A thematic analysis of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006) in relation to this research question revealed a range of prevalent and consistent factors in relation to participants' educational journey and resulted in the following four themes being identified:

- *Becoming a student: a transition into higher education for work-based learners*
- *Placements: the challenge for work-based learners*
- *The learning environment: why it is significant*
- *Learning Communities: what they offer*

These themes focus on the experiences of participants both *becoming* and *being* a student within higher education. This includes the negotiation and renegotiation of existing identities alongside the construction of new ones and draws on the concept of transition (Gale and Parker, 2014).

The themes in this chapter are illustrated with data drawn from 15 of the 20 participants (12 women and three men) including nine participants from the national distance learning university and six from the local face-to-face university demonstrating the prevalence of the themes across both the data set and programmes. The final section of the chapter focuses on one of the participant's experiences in a case study, Laura's story. This case study offers a holistic illustration of the four themes and how they bind together to provide a 'telling case' (Mitchell, 1984).

## **5.2            BECOMING A STUDENT: A TRANSITION INTO HIGHER EDUCATION FOR WORK- BASED LEARNERS**

Becoming a student involved a process of transitions for work-based learners involving a negotiation and renegotiation of identities with 'learner' and 'student' identities being central to this. In making a distinction between a 'learner identity' and a 'student identity' I have drawn on Thunborg et al's definitions (2013) with the term 'learner' used in this thesis to reflect the individual's social and previous educational experience and the term 'student' being more context specific reflecting the participant's position in this thesis within higher education (section 2.4.1).

As work based learners, all of the participants were mature students and as such reflected one of the categories for 'non-traditional' students (section 2.2.1). Of the 20 participants six had prior degrees but for most of the remaining 14 the impact of prior social and educational experience shaped not only their decisions to undertake the degree (section 4.2) but also continued to influence perceptions of themselves as learners and students during their higher education journeys. Brian was in his third year of the social work degree at the local face-to-face university. Despite having undertaken previous educational courses, Brian recognised the significance of his early school experiences in the transition to becoming a student and the educational journey he had undertaken. The labelling of him as a 'non-achiever' in compulsory education impacted upon his identity as a learner and the employment options he perceived to be available to him. The careers advice he received when leaving school steered him towards a local shipbuilding firm with no discussion of his own aspirations. When asked a question about what having a degree meant to him Brian referred back to his early educational experiences:

Brian: I'll feel really good about myself to be quite frank because my time through education as a child wasn't very successful if I'm honest and I was written off ... so if you come from that sort of start it's an uphill struggle really ... there was no belief in me and I'm probably carrying a bit of that burden with me as well which is all the more reason to spur us on to say 'well actually, I can do it', and when I get the qualification for my self-esteem, that'll be great. (Int. 1: 31.1.13)

This extract suggests that Brian believes that his academic insecurity and identity as a learner was shaped by prior experience and how others



**understood his potential** 'there was no belief in me and I'm probably carrying a bit of that burden with me' **which followed him through university.** His intention to challenge this perception of himself by undertaking the social work degree suggests a desire to challenge and disrupt existing expectations and that higher education provided an opportunity to do that.

Brian suggests that prior educational experiences fostered a commonality amongst the group of work-based learners that he joined at university, with this contributing to a shared social identity. The structure of the work-based learning route at the local face-to-face university meant that the work-based learners undertook the first year of the degree separated from the remainder of the students on the traditional full-time route with the two groups combining in year two. At this point participants became aware of the different 'types' of students on the programme and made comparisons, strengthening their sense of a specific identity in relation to others:

*Brian: Some of us as mature students have had similar types of experience and we'll have all come with some insecurity around our academic ability ... some of the younger ones have went straight from school to do this so that academic writing and the academic prowess, they feel very confident ... So we might have felt 'can we actually cut it academically at this level' and relied on each other to support ourselves. (Int. 1: 31.1.13)*

Brian positions the mature students with academic insecurities in relation to the 'younger' students with more 'academic prowess', emphasising how different the work-based learners were from younger, traditional students. This experience also signals the significance of a 'learning community' (Lave and Wenger, 1991:29) (section 2.3.3) comprised of the mature

students on the work-based learning route who acted as sources of support for each during the transition into higher education. The importance of a learning community (Lave and Wenger, 1991:29) of work-based learners was a recurring feature of Brian's experience in higher education. In the second year, when the groups of work-based learners and full-time students were combined, there were opportunities for further comparisons between these groups as 'learning communities' (Lave and Wenger, 1991:29) merged and new learning communities evolved (section 5.5).

Like Brian, Diane's narrative of the transition into higher education suggested that her identity as a learner on leaving school contributed to her initial anxieties in relation to the role of a student, in particular the assessment process. Having undertaken some National Vocational Qualifications at work she gained confidence but when she was presented with the opportunity of being seconded onto the work-based learning route for the social work degree she doubted her academic capability, 'maybes I'm a fool to myself, maybes I can't do this, maybes, I've gone that bit too far' (Int. 2: 11.7.2013). Her comment implies that participation in higher education was not realistic for her. In the narrative below she describes the significance of early positive feedback in relation to her confidence as a learner:

Diane: When I come to do my first paper I thought 'oh my Lord what have I let myself in for' and then when I submitted it and I got a good mark for it I thought 'actually I can do this, it's just writing in a total different way' but I can do it. (FG. 2: 20.6.2012)

The importance of positive feedback to Diane's confidence and student identity is evident in this extract and made her feel that higher education and

a professional qualification was a more realistic goal. Whilst this extract suggests that the submission of her first assignment was particularly challenging it also suggests that that success in this academic task was an important 'turning point' (O'Shea, 2014:140) (section 2.3.3).

Becoming a student whilst still occupying a position at work was accompanied by feelings of vulnerability, fear of failure and exposure, factors that can contribute to a sense of what has been referred to as 'imposter phenomenon' (Clance and Imes, 1978; Chapman, 2012-13) (section 2.4.1). Petra worked in a multi-agency setting with a variety of qualified professionals and had undertaken the degree in order to gain professional credibility amongst her colleagues by being able to lay claim to professional credentials. Petra talked about how exposed she felt by her student identity, exacerbated by self-doubt:

Petra: It was so public, it was so out there everyone in the team knew about it. ... I felt the pressure and I thought I have to qualify because ... (they) relied on me getting that qualification so it was huge a lot of pressure on that because I thought, if I fail or anything like that a lot of people are going to know about it. (Int. 1: 20.8.2013)

For Petra, colleagues knowing that she was undertaking a course meant her success or failure was very visible and making her susceptible to scrutiny by her colleagues. Her need to demonstrate success as a student meant that for her there was a lot at stake for her professional reputation. Having been a confident practitioner, becoming a student meant putting herself in a position where there was a risk of losing rather than gaining credibility.

In contrast to the participants with no previous experience in higher education, those who had already undertaken degrees were able to anticipate the readjustments required for re-entry into higher education. Rebecca had a first degree and had recently undertaken further study prior to the social work degree giving her the opportunity to reevaluate her academic skills. In the extract below she describes a set of skills required for study in higher education and how revisiting these helped her review her readiness for the degree:

Rebecca: If you've been out of studying for a while, just getting your head round studying again. I think what was helpful for me was that I had done the professional certificate for (practice context) ... so I'd had the 'how to write an essay again' that type of drama, so that was helpful and being in a classroom so that **was** helpful and that helped me to decide whether I wanted to do this when the opportunity came up. (Int. 1: 25.3.2013)

Whilst Rebecca had previous practice in academic writing with her first degree and recent study, this extract suggests that there is a readjustment with each period of study. For participants like Rebecca, having a degree could suggest that she had the required cultural capital for higher education (Bourdieu, 1991; Reay, 1998; Greenbank, 2006; Esmund, 2012) (section 2.3.2). She already had achieved at a higher education level but she refers to the most recent period of study as being helpful in refreshing her skills and preparing her for the social work degree thereby giving her the confidence to return to higher education. Testing out the required skills gave her re-assurance in her ability to manage some of the challenges of university such as learning in a classroom environment and writing essays which appear to have contributed to mollifying the transition and gave her

confirmation of a '*viable learner identity*' (McSweeney, 2012:366) (section 2.4.1).

Rebecca was one of six participants in this study who already had first degrees. Valerie also had a first degree and a post-graduate diploma when she began the social work degree. Valerie's narrative of educational experience, like the other participants with degrees, signalled that she also had sufficient cultural capital required for higher education and had begun the degree without concern regarding her academic capabilities, 'I thought, well academically I'll be able to pull this off' (Int. 2: 13.8.2013). However, her academic confidence was challenged by some of her grades:

Valerie: And suddenly you're getting grades that were not in line with what my expectations were so suddenly you begin to feel 'I'm not as academically bright as I thought I was'. (Int. 2: 13.8.2013)

This suggests that although Valerie began the social work degree with an existing '*viable learner identity*' (McSweeney, 2012:366), validated by academic achievements, engaging in higher education involves a series of transitions at different stages. Her disappointment in some initial marks resulted in her dedicating more time to her studies signalling the importance attached to this role:

Valerie: 60% being really honest is not good enough for me and I know that and therefore everything else has to be put on hold. (FG. 1: 16.6.2012)

Her initial experience of assessment on the social work degree signifies the power of assessment to 'redefine identities' (O'Shea, 2014) highlighted in

Valerie's re-evaluation of herself, 'I'm not as academically bright as I thought I was'.

Successfully managing the academic requirements of the degree programme was also very significant for participants who did not have prior degrees. For Hilary, like other participants, developing academic confidence was key in managing the transition into higher education. Both the academic requirements and acclimatisation to an academic environment were very anxiety provoking as this narrative suggests:

Hilary: It was absolutely terrifying, coming to university and having to write that first essay in an academic format and then reference as well, it was just really overwhelming because like you're doing school work, sitting in a school environment I hadn't done that for years, and years but ... I'm really pleased I **have** because I think it's really built my self-esteem up and my confidence and because actually I can write essays really well.  
(FG. 2: 20.6.12)

Hilary had left a role in a social work agency where she was a confident practitioner and made a number of personal adjustments to become a student, a transition that she felt was very challenging. This extract signals that Hilary initially lacked academic confidence in the context of higher education but that she gradually grew in confidence through becoming accomplished in the academic tasks associated with being a student and adapting to the context, thus redefining her identity as a learner. Lillian also identified the assessment process as central to her experience signalling this as a transition. She had undertaken a number of educational courses to prepare her for the social work degree however, it was producing

academic work that provided a first 'turning point' (O'Shea, 2014:140)

reinforcing her student identity on the degree. She made this link clear:

*Lillian: It's only when you start getting those assignments and those questions and that you start thinking 'oh, I am really a student now'. (Int. 1: 20.12.2012)*

Developing a student identity is shaped by context and for some participants was also reliant upon the types of opportunities presented by universities to learn. In the following extract, Morag suggests that having an authentic learning experience contributed to her sense of being and becoming a student by being introduced to areas of knowledge relevant to her role that she was unfamiliar with:

*Morag: I think it's 'cos I've been in care work such a long time that a lot of lectures, I'm not saying that to be arrogant but there's a lot of sort of value-based stuff that I've got there in my little toolkit already ... Yeah, didn't stretch me but then there was some really fantastic stuff where I did feel like a student 'cos I didn't have a clue and I was like, 'wow, this is fantastic'. (Int.1, 19.12.2012)*

Whilst Morag's student identity was enhanced when she felt she was learning new things, 'I did feel like a student 'cos I didn't have a clue' she felt that a lot of the teaching covered familiar ground and due to her extensive practice experience did not offer her anything new thereby lacking authenticity as a learning experience. This involved a set teaching curriculum which Morag at times found frustrating as it reiterated her existing practices. However, when presented with opportunities to extend her understanding she found this empowering and reinforced her growing sense of student identity.

Becoming and being students required transitions for participants both for those with and without prior degrees. These transitions however, were shaped differentially by previous educational experience and having the appropriate academic skills and cultural capital (section 2.3.2).

### **5.3 PLACEMENTS: THE CHALLENGE FOR WORK-BASED LEARNERS**

As work-based learners familiar with the context of practice, being on placement was particularly challenging and caused confusion over roles and associated identities. Work-based learners often undertake placements in their current place of work, a common practice on social work degrees. In the following extract Brian states that being on placement in his current place of work impeded his ability to be a student. He contrasts this with his experience of a placement in a different practice context:

Brian: In the first year some of your work is related to your placement which is your workplace so you're writing about stuff you do every day and you don't feel like a student there really ... Now this year ... I've become a full-time student with a placement and a **total** different feel, adult mental health which I absolutely loved and got a lot out of, and this felt like being a proper student this year. (FG. 3: 17.7.2012)

It appears that even though he maintained a role within his original place of work, the boundaries between the role of worker and student were blurred. Being on placement in a different context of practice gave him something new, creating what he perceived to be an authentic learning experience thereby emphasising his role as a student, 'this felt like being a proper student'. When on a designated placement in his first year in his place of



work Brian suggests there were limited learning opportunities, 'it's very difficult to tease out learning out of something you've done every day for a decade' (Int. 2: 21.8.2013).

The familiarity of the practice context and how this impacted on the role and associated identity of participants created new challenges as well as opportunities for participants. 'Knowing' or 'not knowing' about the practice within particular contexts was key to a number of participants' experiences and their ability to redefine their identity. Whilst for some participants 'not knowing' created anxieties, for others this was a positive state. Whilst on placement, for Lois being a student and 'not knowing' was a revitalising and liberating experience:

Lois: I've loved being a student. It gives you permission to be somebody else ... When I'm at work people expect me to know everything and I don't know everything all the time ... I went on placement and I was allowed to be somebody that didn't know anything and start again whereas I've never ever had that before and I learned so much. (Int. 1: 9.10.2012)

Lois creates a distinction between her identity as a 'worker' and that of a 'student'. This implies that she sees her identity as layered and regulated by time and context. Being a student moved Lois from being encumbered with expectation in a position of 'expert', to 'somebody that didn't know anything' a liberating experience that she felt facilitated learning and enabled her to redefine herself and 'start again'.

Being a student on placement challenged other participants' understandings of themselves as confident practitioners. Anna, in this extract talks of the lack of familiarity with the practice context of her placement:

*Anna: I struggled being a student on placement this year from going from adult services into children's services, totally different area, I just felt totally de-skilled .... My sort of usual role is more hands-on and then I went from that to spending 80% sat in front of the computer. I really struggled with that. (FG. 3: 17.7.2012)*

Anna draws a distinction here between the familiarity of her usual practice context and being a student on placement in an unfamiliar area of practice. This suggests that her previously established identity as a skilled and confident practitioner is dependent upon the particular role within that context and was undermined by being on placement. For Anna, this created tension between a valued and existing identity based upon her role as a worker and establishing a new identity as a learner. She draws a distinction between being 'hands-on', and being confident about the skills she was using, and being computer-bound. This required a different and unfamiliar skills set in order to meet organisational requirements. Anna's expectations, along with others, draws into sharp focus perceptions of 'operational competence' (Watts and Waraker, 2008:108) and the discrepancy in relation to this between qualified and unqualified roles. This suggests that transitions can be challenging when the value placed on 'operational competence' by an unqualified practitioner is compromised.

Being on placement highlighted a distinction for participants between 'operational competence' at work versus 'academic competence' based upon

the knowledge acquired in higher education. For Morag, this distinction impacted upon her performance in assessments of her academic work:

Morag: I thought (academic performance) reflected really well what I thought about myself, I'm good in practice but if I got to think about something theoretically, reflect on something, that obviously goes a bit pear shaped and it was completely and utterly reflected in my grades.  
(Int.2: 11.7.2013)

Work-based learners enter social work degrees often having had a wealth of opportunities for experiential learning. When assessment was focused on her practice then success was perceived by Morag as more likely. For some work-based learners, academic performance on placement highlighted the interface between experiential understanding and academic understanding. This can create new challenges in bridging skills and theoretical based elements of social work practice or operational and academic competencies.

Being on placement was also challenging for some students due to previously established relationships with colleagues and their perceptions of their role within their organisation. Morag found that when she returned to her employing organisation for her final placement there was a lack of recognition of her 'student' role which created problems for her in fulfilling the university expectations of her on placement. She believed that the challenge for her colleagues was due to relationships she had previously established with them prior to her placement beginning. Morag identified the continued expectations colleagues had of her as a worker suggesting

that her 'worker' identity was considered salient by others. In the following extract Morag describes the challenges:

Morag: There was an awful lot of people who knew me in the office and it was really difficult to get them to recognise that I was just a student ... and I had to actually sit down with my supervisor and remind him that I was a student ... so what was really difficult for people just switch off and go, 'oh Morag's a student, she's just learning'. (Int. 2: 11.7.2013)

This extract emphasises the contextual and interactional qualities of identity. Morag understands her role on placement as that of a 'student' but for her colleagues, her 'practitioner' identity was salient and reinforced through their interaction with her. Morag, like other work-based learners, was a seconded student on placement within her employing organisation. Instead of her employers and manager affirming her student status, it was left to Morag to negotiate space in order to establish her role as a student within the organisation. For Morag, there was a lack of coherence between these dual roles which appeared to be conflated by colleagues on the basis of organisational and managerial need, with an expectation that work would be prioritised.

The boundaries between 'practitioner' and 'student' were thrown into sharp relief for some participants when navigating different expectations depending on what role they occupied at the time, 'student' or 'practitioner'. Like Morag, Hannah's experience of being a student was dependent upon context and, when away from her place of work, being a student was a preserved and protected position. In the extract below Hannah identifies

what being a student meant to her, contrasting this with being a practitioner within an organisation:

Hannah: The only time I actually really felt like an actual student was when I was away from work and on placement because you are treated like a social work student and ... you had to have I think an hour and a half of weekly supervision ... and discuss your values and all those sorts of things which I didn't do any of that when I was in my normal workplace you just got on with the job (FG. 3: 17.7.2012)

Hannah's extract also signals how *becoming* a student was dependent on both contextual and relational factors and that, by moving from her place of work to another practice context for her placement, her student identity became more distinct. Whilst in her place of work her role as a student was obscured. However, being on placement was liberating with the focus being on learning, 'being looked after and treated like a student ... given time to learn' (FG. 3: 17.7.2012). In talking about what *being* a student meant to her she recognises how this was reinforced through interaction with her supervisor. Hannah also sees her role as a student in terms of resources (time, supervision, a focus on values) which she sees shaping expectations and also as privileging the student role but this was only evident whilst on placement. The resources and opportunities that accompanied her student role whilst on placement, away from her place of work, were absent in her role as a practitioner within her place of work highlighting a disparity of expectations depending on context. For Hannah being a 'student social worker' in her workplace, as opposed to a 'family support worker', positioned her differently within her organisation and meant that when not on placement the volume and complexity of her workload increased. However, the privileges afforded the role of student that had been provided

whilst on placement, were not forthcoming in her role as a student within her normal place of work.

Placements offer an important learning environment for social work students but require clear expectations from others about roles and resourcing these with interactions either reinforcing or undermining student identities. The academic environment offers another setting for students to engage with and the next section explores the significance of learning environments on the two programmes.

#### **5.4 THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: WHY IT IS SIGNIFICANT**

The educational environmental factors identified as being significant by participants included being in classroom settings, accessing a campus library, being campus based and being in a shared space with other students. Participants' narratives of their experiences of being a student referred to the significance of their learning environments and the meanings they attributed to them. For the two programmes, one a face-to-face and one a predominantly virtual environment with some face-to-face dimensions, student experiences were at times different.

Keith talked about the significance of place at a time in his life that was characterised by challenging transitions. He had become a parent for the first time just as the course began so was managing other transitions whilst also becoming a student. When asked about how he managed the move

into higher education Keith presented a narrative about the impact of the environment:

Keith: I struggled with (being a student) in the first year, the work-based learning year ... I wasn't really here (university) and I felt like I wasn't really at work either, that kind of left us a little bit sort of in limbo ... I wanted to get on and get into the second year to give it a much more real concrete feeling to being a student and being immersed in it. And then the difference was quite significant when I got here ... the academic side, the library and being in here (university) spending time with other students. (Int. 2: 9.7.2013)

Keith highlights the contrast to being a student with only occasional attendance (in the first year of the local face-to-face university degree) and the more 'concrete feeling to being a student' which he experienced as a result of being campus based where he could access the library and was in the company of other students. He describes the contrast between occasional attendance on campus and full-time attendance with his 'arrival' at university in the second year, 'when I got here'. This signalled the significance of the environment (a point emphasised by Thomas, 2012) and the impact this had on *becoming* and *being* a student.

Brian was in the second year of the same programme as Keith at the local face-to-face university. He also made a distinction between the first and second year because of increased physical attendance at the university and the impact of context on his sense of identity suggesting a radical transition:

Brian: When you started year two your life changed dramatically because ... we walked out of our jobs and we became students then 'cos for that period of time, two or three months or whatever, you were just at university every day. (Int. 1: 31.1.2013)

Brian here appears to suggest a transition emphasising the movement between contexts, 'we walked out of our jobs and we became students' with the environment being fundamental to this, 'you were just at university every day'. He had undertaken a number courses in his place of work and draws a distinction between being a learner in a university and being a learner in the workplace:

Brian: The environment worked for me ... I've been learning in the workplace for a long time but I haven't had the time that you're afforded away from the responsibilities of a job that you get when you're in University ... when you're a work-based learner in your first year you're still thinking about all the complexities of your cases and all of the stuff that you have in your day to day job ... I still was there doing my job and being a student in the background. Whereas in University the primary thing that's going on is your academic learning, it's being a student. (Int. 2: 21.8.2013)

Here Brian highlights some of the tensions and competing demands between the roles of student and a worker. Whilst he remained at work his occupational role was given primacy with the role of student being secondary and remaining 'in the background'. He welcomed the move to full time study in year two of the local face-to-face programme and the change in his environment. This move signalled an opportunity to relinquish the encumbering competing demands of work when he was juggling the roles of student and worker. A transition in identity and *becoming* a student was reinforced by the change in context 'you're a student, you're in University' (Int. 2: 21.8.2013).



For participants who undertook the national distance learning university degree, their experience of university meant attendance at taught face-to-face sessions approximately once per month over the course of their studies as well as engaging in digital learning contexts. When they did attend face-to-face sessions, the venues for these were local centres, some being a building belonging to the university and therefore having a university identity, and some being general community resources. For Donny on this programme *being* a student was also linked to environment but he, like other participants on the distance learning programme, often foregrounded the significance of the virtual rather than the physical context. Donny signals blurring of boundaries between domestic and educational domains given that performing the role of student often took place in a domestic environment, 'doing it at home on your settee', which created challenges:

Donny: You're not actually going to an establishment or building to go and learn, you're doing it at home on your settee or in your study at home ... You're not actually going anywhere to do anything you're just continuing as you are but with just lots of extra work to do so ... in some ways I didn't feel like a student in that respect because I wasn't going to University. (FG. 3: 17.7.2012)

Donny here appears to suggest that whilst he was performing the role of a student 'just lots of extra work to do', the blurring of boundaries between domestic and educational domains failed to provide the clear distinction in contexts that Donny appeared to require which impacted upon the development of a student identity 'I didn't feel like a student in that respect because I wasn't going to University'. This was echoed in comments by other students from the national distance learning university. This blended learning mode of delivery lends itself to more '*asynchronous learning*'

(Martin et al, 2014:204) (section 2.4.1) which might be experienced by some students as isolating. Sally, who was also on this programme, located herself as a student within her domestic sphere separated from other students and emphasised the challenges this created for her:

Sally: I'm a student on my own until I come together with the groups and that's why I find that the workshops are really important for me and I enjoyed them because it does give you that ... feeling that you are part of a group. You are all learning the same thing ..., when we do the work on the charts and things like that in groups that are what I would say learning and being a student is, as opposed to being shut away in my bedroom on my own. (Int. 1: 23.3.2013)

For Sally, being at the national distance learning university on a blended learning programme (section 3.4.1) could be an isolating experience, 'being shut away in my bedroom on my own'. It was the opportunities to learn in a shared environment and in a group, becoming part of a 'learning community' (Lave and Wenger, 1991:29), that appeared to be more fulfilling and strengthened her identity as a student. This suggests that integration and engagement is achieved through meaningful interaction with others and satisfying the need to belong that comes from occupying shared spaces. Such spaces do not have to be physically shared; some participants on the national distance learning degree extended opportunities for learning with the use of digital environments. Lois describes how she used Facebook as a learning forum:

Lois: We used to have a little group on Facebook and we'd all (there was me and Laura, Mary and Valerie) and we'd say, should we meet at 5 o'clock to have a discussion. (Int. 2: 20.9.2013)

For participants undertaking the national distance learning programme, the model of blended learning meant most of the materials were delivered on line with considerably less face-to-face time than traditional routes and campus based universities. The learning environment was on occasions also extended to workshops and digital forums. Digital forums included module forums as formal programme resources where students could 'meet' to discuss the programme content.

Participation in workshops and forums was mediated by students more than face-to-face programmes with greater opportunities for individuals to determine their learning environment. Participants made choices about *how* and *where* to manage being a student but sometimes these choices were imposed upon them due to programme structures. Becoming and being a student meant navigating the boundaries between the educational and domestic contexts which for some participants was blurred creating challenges for work-based learners in creating legitimate spaces for study.

## **5.5 LEARNING COMMUNITIES: WHAT THEY OFFER**

Learning communities (Lave and Wenger, 1991:29), and the opportunities for establishing relationships with other students, were a significant factor for many of the participants at both the national distance learning university and local face-to-face university in shaping their experiences of higher education. Work-based learners are already part of particular 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 2010) (section 2.3.3) in their places of work and join

new ones when they enter higher education. Wenger (2010) suggests that people engage with a multiplicity of communities and need to identify with each community, negotiating their place within it. The meaning people attach to participation is negotiated and renegotiated in a dynamic process.

Work-based learners in their first year at the local face-to-face university were taught separately as a group only joining the full cohort of social work students in the second year. Consequently, participants in this study felt they had already formed a distinct social group identity prior to merging with the larger group 'a lot of us had the same experience ... so we just bonded really tightly as a group' (Morag, Int. 1: 19.12.2012). Students on the national distance learning programme had on line forums that they belonged to and were encouraged to participate in as well as attending monthly tutorials/workshops although students' attendance was only compulsory for some of the modules. The national distance learning degree was also modular, facilitating individual pathways which meant that students were not part of a fixed group and not necessarily with the same students on each module.

Positioning themselves in relation to the other students was a feature of many participants experiences of being a student. Diane was undertaking the social work degree at the local face-to-face university. Her daughter was at university at the same time as her having followed a traditional route into higher education from school. This made Diane particularly conscious of being an older student with her daughter describing her as 'Mother Mitford, the student social worker ... and they all think I'm about 30' (FG. 2:

20.6.2012). Diane's experience as a work-based learner illustrates the distinction made between work-based learners and other students 'the difference between us all is I've been working, you have been educated' (Int. 2: 11.7.2013) reflecting both non-traditional and traditional routes into higher education. Like Morag she identified with the other work-based learners however, she did not like the distinction made between the two groups of students and welcomed opportunities for the groups to mix:

Diane: I think in certain lectures us work-based learners still stayed in a particular group which the seminar groups helped really loads because we were split ... instead of being 'them' and 'us', become all of us. And I think they (full-time students) even understood at the end that we don't have the answers for everything. We are here to learn just as much. (Int. 2: 11.7.2013)

Diane, like other participants, valued integration with the whole group in the second year of the local face-to-face university programme. For Diane, it helped her to be recognised as a 'learner', not the 'expert' that some full-time students assumed because of her practice experience as a work-based learner, 'we are here to learn just as much'. This suggests the existence of different 'learning communities' (Lave and Wenger, 1991:29), that is a network of people with whom participants identified and shared experiences, with students on the traditional route comprising one learning community from which work-based learners were excluded. Participants were also aware of being identified by students on the traditional route at the local face-to-face university as a resource on the social work programme. Diane recognised the expectations that other students had of work-based learners:

Diane: I think it was quite daunting that they looked on you as if to say, well you work in the job so you must know and I'd be sitting there thinking, 'oh my life, really don't know the answer to that question'. I think there are expectations of us. (Int. 2: 11.7.2013)

These expectations act as a source of pressure for Diane. However, Morag challenged the exclusivity of the label of 'work-based learner' and the privileging of practice experience that was associated with this label at the local face-to-face university. She acknowledged that other students shared some of their experiences of work:

Morag: Obviously the majority of the student group, even the larger student group have an awful lot of experience and have just come to University from a different route but they probably had just as much work experiences ... but for some reason we just saw ourselves as something different. (Int. 1: 19.12.2012)

Morag differentiates here between students on the traditional route with work experience and the work-based learners on the degree, a distinction that is commented on by nearly all of the participants from this programme.

The presence of stable relationships is a significant factor in the experiences of participants in this study who talked about their relationships with their peers in terms of the importance of being part of identifiable groups and the support these offered. Such groups constituted learning communities. These groups also offered support in managing the transition into higher education for work-based learners as well as managing the academic requirements of the programme. Morag's description of membership of the work-based learners' group at the local face-to-face

university emphasises group cohesion and how the relationships with other work-based learners were interdependent.

Morag: Well I personally relied on the group for everything ... we'd sit together in lectures, if when we went to the seminars I would gravitate again to any other work-based learners that were in that seminar group. Lunch, we'd all lunch together so ... we moved as a group as much as possible and that made things a lot easier because we had gelled as a group. Occasionally you would meet up with other people ... but I always gravitate back to the group ... So I think it helped me feel like a student ... I think I would have found it difficult if I didn't have a little work-based identity. (Int. 2: 11.7.2013)

At a time of transition, the importance to her of this social identity as a learner binding individuals together to create a homogenous group, is evident in Morag's narrative, 'we have tended to be this little bubble that moves around together with each other.' (Int. 1: 19.12.2012). As a relatively small group within a larger group of students on the traditional route, they appear to have developed an exclusiveness, a discreet social identity. A sense of belonging was implied in the cohesion that Morag describes, 'find one of us you've found all of us' (Int. 1: 19.12.2012).

Whilst seven of the eight participants from the local face-to-face university identified the importance of support from their peers it was not as prevalent amongst participants from the national distance learning university with only six of the 12 identifying this as a feature of their educational journey. However, peer support was still important to this group and in a focus group containing only participants from the national distance learning university the participants, nearing the end of their degree, talked about their sense of

loss as the end of the degree approached. In the following extract, Lois reflects with other participants on the importance of the support she received from fellow students:

Lois: I've loved being a student **and** I've got so much from people in the class. I couldn't have done it on my own. When I think of how I felt the first time when I started ... and you get so much from them like texting 'what do I do with this' and three people answer you ... and I don't know what I'm going to do when I don't belong to that group ... because your uni buddies are your uni buddies and they're not going to be uni buddies anymore and that's going to be hard I think.

Valerie: We'll be social work buddies instead.

Lois: Will we? That'll be good then (Mary: chuckles) that'll be good. But yeah, you're right it is another transition and I think for me it's going to be difficult. (FG. 1: 16.6.2012)

Being part of a group (or learning community) and receiving support from the other members was identified by Lois and others as being integral to the student experience and in the extract above Lois anticipates a further transition following the end of the programme. The impending sense of loss was countered by her peers who suggested that the group could transcend institutional boundaries. Whilst Lois extolled the virtues of belonging to a group of students, other participants on the national distance learning programme enjoyed the more solitary journey that could be steered on this programme. Hannah identified why she opted out of a support network comparing it to the first time she was at university when there were constant discussions with others about progress with academic tasks. Hannah explained why she particularly liked the national distance learning programme:



Hannah: I could just be on my own. By the third year I think people were really hitting stress point and I found people like ringing us and texting us at like 10 o'clock at night, you know 'I'm really stressed about this' and I was just like 'I don't need this I'm stressed about my own work I don't want to be thinking about yours as well'. (FG. 3: 17.7.2012)

Whilst most participants recognised and embraced the benefits of peer support on their educational journey, Hannah was one of the participants on the national distance learning degree who welcomed the opportunity to be a more independent learner during their degree. As one of the participants with a prior degree Hannah contrasted her experience on a work-based learning programme with her first experiences of higher education as a traditional student when belonging to a group was a more integral part of the student experience. When describing the pressure, she felt on her first degree, when there was closer scrutiny from peers about your management of academic tasks, Hannah said 'I really like doing the (national distance learning) degree cos I didn't get any of that' (FG. 3: 17.7.2012). Some participants on the local face-to-face university found immersion into a 'learning community' (Lave and Wenger, 1991:29) reinforced their student identity and this was therefore embraced. However, Hannah's experience suggests that there are also disadvantages to learning communities due to the demands placed on her by other participants. As a graduate, she appears less dependent on a student group to manage the challenges of higher education and as a work-based learner on the national distance learning degree she was able to tailor the experience of higher education this time round to meet her individual needs.

Learning communities were a feature of the participants' experiences of higher education, with belonging to student groups being identified as important in their educational journey. Whilst learning communities were evident in both programmes, the programme design impacted upon the opportunities for the formation of these and how students used them. Participants on the local face-to-face university programme in particular signalled a strong identification with other work-based learners and how this bound them together creating strong social identities through learning communities. Whilst this had real benefits it was also not without its challenges such as the demands made by other members. For participants on the national distance learning programme there were different types of opportunities to participate in 'learning communities' (Lave and Wenger, 1991:29) with the emphasis being on the digital forums available to students, both programme led and 'bootlegged' (Wenger et al, 2002:28). Boot-legged forums, that is using social media sites for closed group discussions, extended the contexts and environments for learning. When these were driven by students they were a great source of support. However, participants on this route felt also at times that learning environments were detached and without boundaries. For some not being part of a distinct learning community was welcome simplifying the challenges of the social work degree by minimising the distractions of other students.

Four themes have been presented in this data chapter so far in relation to the second research question, '*How do students experience the educational journey*': 'becoming a student: a transition into higher education for work-

based learners; 'placements: the challenge for work-based learners'; 'the learning environment: why it is significant' and 'learning communities: what they offer'. As with the first data chapter, the final section in this chapter will explore how these themes coalesce in one participant's narrative of experience with the presentation of a case study to provide a 'telling case' (Mitchell, 1984).

## **5.6 LAURA'S STORY - *'It has mammothly changed my self-esteem'***

Laura was 35 years of age with five years of experience in social care when she began the social work programme at the national distance learning university. Her educational journey in higher education was initially shaped by her negative experiences of school, 'I came out of school with not many qualifications at all and thought academically I am not up to this' (FG. 1: 16.6.2012). This impacted upon her confidence and identity as both a learner as well as a practitioner long after she left school, 'so I kind of had that stereotypical image of myself as being a bit slow ... being good at my job but not so good at the reading and writing side of it' (Int. 1: 9.10.2012).

Consequently, she was cautious and apprehensive about undertaking further education. Whilst she had established a secure professional identity, university was a context that symbolised struggle and posed risks to her self-esteem. The work-based learning route on the degree offered a point of access into higher education and the modular structure presented an opportunity to have some control over the journey, 'I'll pay for this, see how I go, if I'm up to it academically then I'll cross the next bridge'. It kind of went from

there' (FG. 1: 16.6.2012). **Meeting the academic requirements was a 'turning point' (O'Shea, 2014:140) for Laura,** 'it has mammothly changed my self-esteem' (FG. 1: 16.6.2012).

**Laura initially found the return to education challenging identifying a new set of skills that she needed to develop to be able to manage the academic requirements of the programme successfully,** 'revision was something I just didn't think I could do, a foreign concept to me' (Int. 1: 9.10.2012). **Laura overcame these challenges and passed her first exam which contributed to a growing academic confidence,** 'I never thought I would get through it let alone get marks I am pleased with' (FG. 1: 16.6.2012). **Whilst on placement Laura recognised the impact of her newly acquired academic skills,** 'I can now use those skills to produce good reports' (Int. 1: 9.10.2012). **Placements offered further opportunities for development as a practitioner. Based on her experience as a work-based learner, Laura talked about her deepening understanding of the relevance of theory to practice,** 'you might not know what the theories are behind it but you've got those key skills' (FG. 1: 16.6.2012). **Developing academic confidence and knowledge of theories as a student signalled a transition in Laura's professional identity,** 'I started to feel like a real social worker now 'cos I know stuff' (FG. 1: 16.6.2012).

**Initially lacking in confidence as a student, Laura found that that digital forums on the programme offered opportunities to engage in a learning environment that was less threatening than traditional face-to-face mediums,** 'I liked the forums because you could sort of hide as well behind the laptop and test the water and nothing was too stupid ... Maybe in a lecture I

wouldn't have put my hand up and said, 'I don't understand' (Int. 1: 9.10.2012).

Digital forums enabled her to develop confidence whilst minimising risks and avoiding feeling exposed and vulnerable. Once she had gained in confidence Laura became a more visible member of peer groups. They proved to be a vital source of support with Laura describing other members as being, '100% in your boat and, you know, when it's sinking sometimes they paddle'. (Int. 1: 9.10.2012). Membership of this 'learning community' (Lave and Wenger, 1991:29) reinforced a social identity for Laura with the educational journey becoming a shared experience which was mutually understood, 'the only person who knows what it's like to be doing the ... social work degree is somebody else putting in the same amount of work as you' (Int. 1: 9.10.2012).

The educational journey for Laura was a notably significant experience, 'It's just been such a big part of my life' (Int. 1: 9.10.2012) presenting a variety of challenges and opportunities. The challenges for Laura were managed by a range of factors including the renegotiation of roles and responsibilities at home and the support of other students when the challenges felt overwhelming. As a period of transition for Laura, higher education had a profound impact on her personally.

## **5.7 CONCLUSION**

This chapter has explored four themes in response to the second research question - *How do students experience the educational journey?* Extracts from 15 participants' data are used in this chapter to illustrate themes which

cluster around the challenges and opportunities of *becoming* and *being* a student. Participants identified a range of factors that both impeded as well as facilitated this educational journey with placements, learning environments and belonging to learning communities (Lave and Wenger, 1991:29) all being important for participants from both the national distance learning and local face-to-face social work programmes with some differences identified. Negative experiences of compulsory education and a lack of cultural capital aligned to higher education (Bourdieu, 1991; Baxter and Britton, 2001; Esmund, 2012) created particular challenges for participants with higher education signalling a period of transition for work-based learners. The transition into higher education involved the gradual development of a 'viable learner identity' (McSweeney, 2012:366) with the development of academic skills, positive feedback and the support of learning communities (Lave and Wenger, 1991:29) (section 2.3.3). This transition also involved the negotiation of an identity as a student and the renegotiation of an identity as learner based on prior educational experience (section 2.4.1). The data also revealed that placements were identified as valued opportunities by participants. However, placements often failed to provide participants with what they believed was an authentic student experience when in their place of work due in part to the lack of recognition of the participants' student role by others. When recognition was forthcoming placements were found to be liberating creating the desired time and space to learn. Straddling the dual domains of 'work and university' and 'university and home' added to the complexity of the experience and created challenges in transitioning between multiple identities. This is explored further in the following and final data chapter

focusing on the conflict between identities and the accommodation of multiple identities across domains.

## CHAPTER SIX

# **Roles and identities: the challenges and opportunities for work-based learners in higher education**

### **6.1 INTRODUCTION**

This final data chapter focuses on the third research question – *What personal and social challenges and opportunities do students identify whilst undertaking work-based learning routes in social work education?* Roles and resulting identities were consistently identified as shaping the challenges and opportunities that participants experienced with the following overarching themes being presented in this chapter:

- *Experiencing conflict with roles and identities*
- *Accommodating roles and identities*

These two overarching themes, each divided into two sub themes, explore the conflicts that participants encountered when they sought to accommodate the additional role and associated identity of a student and what factors enabled this. To develop understandings of how participants accommodate multiple roles and identities this chapter draws on a structural



symbolic interactionist approach and in particular identity theory (section 2.3.1), central to which is salience, and in addition draws on the concept of transition (section 2.3.3).

Data extracts from 18 of the 20 participants (13 women and five men), are used to illustrate the themes with seven participants from the local face-to-face university and 11 from the national distance learning university. This range of extracts establishes the prevalence and consistency (Braun and Clarke, 2006) of these themes within the data and across the two programmes. The chapter ends with a case study of one participant, Mary to provide a compelling account of how the themes merge in one participant's narrative providing another 'telling case' (Mitchell, 1984) of what it means to be work-based learner in higher education.

## **6.2 EXPERIENCING CONFLICT WITH ROLES AND IDENTITIES**

The first overarching theme explores the conflict encountered by participants when they sought to accommodate a student role and corresponding identity alongside already established roles and identities. The data suggests that conflict was experienced in a number of ways with the following two sub-themes identified:

- *Being a student: conflict with roles and identities within the workplace.*

- *Being a student: incongruence with roles and identities outside the workplace.*

*Conflict* here is used to signal the apparent incompatibility between roles and identities experienced by participants and *incongruence* is used to signal an inconsistency or jarring with established roles and identities.

### **6.2.1 Being a student: conflict with roles and identities within the workplace**

Most participants identified conflict between being a student as well as a worker within their workplace. The commitment participants had to their position within the workplace as a worker, along with established relationships and interactions with managers and colleagues, created a number of challenges for participants requiring the negotiation and renegotiation of roles and their associated identities. For Morag, being on placement created challenges in being recognised as a student (section 5.3). Entering higher education as an employee of an organisation and balancing these dual roles and accompanying identities however, created a more enduring period of transition that created conflict with colleagues whilst she remained in post. Even though everyone knew she had become a student, for her colleagues her identity of 'worker' was foregrounded as it maintained the focus on organisational needs and minimised the disruption to existing identities and relationships:

Morag: Nobody identified within my workplace that I was a student ... Everybody knew that I got onto the degree and got the secondment. Everybody knew that I'd started ... the fact that I'm still there and I'm still a

family support worker and I still kept my caseload was more important to them than the fact that I was now a student. (Int. 1: 9.12.2012)

Morag appears to be frustrated at the contrasting messages from within her organisation by becoming a student. She had been granted a secondment from her employer onto the social work degree repositioning her within the organisation as a student but there was a subsequent lack of recognition of this by her colleagues. It is evident in the following extract that she found the co-existence of both student and worker identities irreconcilable whilst she remained at her place of work:

Morag: I was **really** pleased to leave and be able to focus on being a student ... being able to take that work hat off completely and become a student. (Int. 1: 9.12.2012)

Morag found the lack of space within her workload afforded her as a student was limiting and she welcomed the opportunity to leave work and be able to concentrate on being a student.

The differences between being a student on a work-based learning route compared to what she considered to be the experiences of other social work students on a traditional route proved a source of frustration for Rebecca:

Rebecca: They just saw you as Rebecca at work - I think I had to remind people that you are doing a degree ... but unless you advertise the fact that you were studying ... nobody was aware so it can be quite lonely, I think that's the hard thing ... I think it's just frustrating when you see other students where you're working ... they get a lot of support and things and you think 'hello I'm a student'. (Int. 1: 25.3.2013)

Rebecca appeared to feel isolated as a result of her colleague's lack of recognition of her position as a student. Her frustration at this was aggravated by the comparison she made with other students and the

privileges that seemed to be afforded them. In order to be recognised as a student in her place of work Rebecca attempted to negotiate this with colleagues making her 'student' identity more visible, 'hello, I'm a student'.

Participants, despite their desire to foreground their role of a student, found a range of barriers within their places of work. Valerie describes in the following narrative the challenges of maintaining a position as a student:

Valerie: So there were lots of times there was that kind of challenge really and it was hard to take your manager's hat off and put your student head on and I think what work were guilty of is they dragged me back to my substantive job a lot whilst I was on placement. So that was the other disadvantage of work-based that I was very accessible and they could tap in all the time. (Int. 2: 13.8.2013)

Valerie signals through referencing to switching hats that she was occupying two roles, that of 'worker' and 'student' within one context. This appears to have created challenges for Valerie and her desire to be recognised by colleagues as a student due to her availability and known occupational role and status within the organisation which she found frustrating. Whilst she remained visible in her role as a worker, which was prioritised by her colleagues, her position as a 'student' was less distinct. The extract highlights that the need to negotiate and renegotiate her roles occurred on a regular basis with transitions between these thereby becoming a 'perpetual series of movements' (Gale and Parker, 2014) reinforcing the fluid movement between them.

The notion of a fluid identity was echoed in Lois's experience with her account identifying a number of labels that were used to describe her role

within her workplace. Her positioning at given times determined how people responded. This is evident in the narrative below:

Lois: Whilst I was a family worker people I think well, viewed you as, 'oh, she's been here for years, she knows what she's talking about', but then I was a student and people were looking at us like, 'oh, you're a student'. What made it worse was because I was on the secondment bit out of my family worker role and they called us a trainee social worker and you know it was the worst thing I had to do in my life because now I wasn't even a student I was a trainee'. (Int. 2: 20.9.2013)

Lois's comments illustrate the frustration she felt at being labelled and positioned in a number of different ways (family worker, student, trainee social worker) making her experience of working within her organisation more complex and confusing. This positioning appeared to be dependent upon others' perceptions signalling a sense of powerlessness in this process. Lois suggested an order in relation to the various labels with 'family worker' affording her most credibility, 'she knows what she's talking about'. Being labelled in different ways created challenges for Lois in 'how to be' (Moss and Pittaway, 2013:1006) and her subsequent interaction with people:

Lois: Parents would phone up and I would still answer the questions because I can't say ... 'don't speak to me anymore because I'm a student. I'll speak to you in six months and I'm back in me own role'. I found that really difficult. (Int. 2: 20.9.2013)

This extract highlights the confusion that Lois experienced as a student within her place of work because of how she was positioned differently according to her role. In the extract below Morag also considers expectations of her when labelled as a 'student' within particular contexts.

She expresses her frustration at being labelled and thus positioned as a student rather than being recognised as a practitioner. Like Lois, Morag attributes credibility to being a practitioner and relates this to a position of 'knowing' signalling 'operational competence' (Watts and Waraker, 2008:108) that she had established over a period of 25 years within the service sector. Her narrative suggests that in some contexts the term 'student' undermined her knowledge and skills as a practitioner and that was frustrating:

Morag: They wouldn't let me do (a particular task) because I was a 'student' ... and that frustrated me a bit because there was times people needed help and there I was, 'I've got my certificate, I can help you if you want'. It was like, 'no, no you're a student ... I found that really difficult. (Int. 2: 11.7.2013)

Being labelled as a student for Morag created tension and contradictions as a practitioner. For work-based learners with established and valued skills and knowledge, being a student can create frustration at the lack of acknowledgement of their attributes and their contribution to practice thereby establishing a lack of congruence with their identity as a practitioner.

Some participants found that their commitment to their role of worker meant that that their role of student was subordinated. The extract below from Petra signals how she foregrounded her worker role which meant making concessions in relation to her role as a student:

Petra: I didn't want to let anyone down, wouldn't let work down, I wanted to still be very much a part of it. With that I should have just stepped back, went and did my placement, concentrated on that fully. I really should have done that. (Int. 1:19.12.2012)

Petra's description of the challenges she faced echoes the experiences of others in this study. As a work-based learner her role as a worker was established and reinforced by relationships and ongoing interaction within her organisation. The salience of this identity was due to years in employment contributing to a well formed, stable and embedded practitioner identity that she was still committed to, 'I wanted to still be very much a part of it' signalling tensions between these two identities. Her experience points to an incompatibility between being a worker and being a student which was challenging for Petra and resulted in a choice being made to foreground her identity as a worker. As a consequence, her position as a student was compromised impacting on her performance, 'it reflected in my assignments' (Int. 1: 19.12.2012).

Whilst participants seemed comfortable with and committed to both their identities as well as their roles as workers, entry into higher education and becoming a student resulted in disruption to these. Brian's experience highlights a contradiction in being a student whilst remaining within his place of work:

Brian: I was still basically in my job, didn't have that many taught days so because we didn't have it, it didn't feel like you were a student so much ... I was supervising three members of staff and the other part of my week I was meant to be a student ... So that inhibits you being a true student. (Int. 2: 21.8.2013)

Brian's experience of being at work and it impeding him being 'a true student', points to a particular 'ideal' of a student on a full-time mode of study with a work-based learning route presenting a counter narrative to

this. The participants in this study described a number of characteristics in relation to 'a traditional student' including being young, on a linear progression from school to higher education, having a very active social life, practiced in academic skills and living independently from family.

Brian's transition into higher education resulted in the merging of two domains, occupational and educational, creating challenges in who to be. He identified various factors that he felt compromised his ability to position himself as a student and reconcile this with his role as a worker. This included managing competing demands on his time as a worker and student and the lack of protected space at work. The lack of time allocated to his student role, '*taught days*', also suggests he associated these with what he considered to be an authentic learning environment enabling him to be a student.

The structure of the programme was a significant factor in relation to becoming a student for a number of participants. Diane found that the process of her becoming a student and developing a clear sense of a student identity changed over time and that this was dependent upon the mode of study, part-time in the first year and full-time in the second and third years. Diane suggests a complex picture of shifting identities positioned on a trajectory illustrating the tensions fuelled by straddling the domains of work and education simultaneously:

*Diane: I think in the second year I become 'Diane, a student' ... in the second year we were in full-time, with the first year we were only one day a month so there was a huge chunk of our time when we were still*



workers ... you tend to still have the hat on that I'm actually a worker first, doing the degree on the back of my job. (Int. 2: 11.7.2013)

The concept of layering identities is evident throughout her journey in higher education, 'I'm actually a 'worker' first, doing the degree on the back of my job'.

The foregrounding of her 'worker' identity suggests a commitment was maintained to this identity whilst at university in her first year. Her student identity was only foregrounded when she left work in the second year of the programme and studied full-time highlighting the contextual nature of people's sense of identity and the time afforded it.

By the time participants had secured the support of their employers and a place on the social work degree, they had established careers in social care/social work agencies and had invested in them. Donny, when comparing the roles of student and worker describes the role of worker as, 'your normal safe role' (Int. 2: 97.2013) and attributes meaning to moving from the role of student to that of worker as, 'pop back to reality' (Int. 2: 97.2013).

This suggests that Donny associated work with a secure and authentic space signalling that adopting a different role, that of a student, is more hazardous. The concept of agency in this context is helpful in understanding how Donny exerted control through movement between roles in order to manage perceived risks, as I discuss below (section 6.2.2).

For participants, graduating from the degree programme presented a further transition which they associated with losing a protected space. For Petra, the loss of the student label and being repositioned as a qualified social

worker generated anxiety, apprehension and feelings of vulnerability signifying that the 'student tag' had offered her protection and security whilst developing as a practitioner:

Petra: It's a bit scary because I don't have that student tag any more. That student tag is gone and this is what I've worked towards and you do have that self-doubt - 'God am I able to do this'? Have they really qualified me? Am I really allowed to do this? (Int. 1: 19.12.2012)

Petra, despite having undertaken and passed the degree, still appeared to doubt herself suggesting that the transition to 'qualified practitioner' is unfinished and a dissonance existed with the accommodation of this new identity. Whilst Petra prior to starting the course had been a confident practitioner, the qualification created different expectations that now resulted in uncertainty for her.

This section has explored some of the conflicts experienced by participants in relation to roles as well as identities within the workplace. The data highlights that participants continued to be committed to, and their colleagues continued to foreground, their roles and corresponding identities as workers creating additional challenges for participants in being a student within this context. The lack of consistency in the resourcing and recognition afforded the position of student within the workplace resulted in insecurity and frustration for participants. Conflict however, was also experienced between what participants wanted and what the choices they made in these contexts.

### **6.2.2 Being a student: incongruence with roles and identities outside the workplace**

In making sense of their experiences in higher education participants highlighted a lack of congruence between their own experiences of being a student and how they understood the experience of students' experiences on traditional routes.

Some participants attached meanings to the label of 'student' pointing to a particular understanding of 'a traditional student' in higher education as a cultural framework in which to position their own experiences. Work-based learners positioned themselves in relation to these characteristics making contrasts between their own experiences as work-based learners as opposed to other 'traditional students'. Ivor compares his son's contemporaneous experience of higher education with his own:

Ivor: I followed his career through photographs on Facebook and it looked different from the way I did mine 'cos he was just off his face you know (other participants laughed) the whole time and it was like 'bloody hell', (other participants laughed) the sod. (FG. 3: 17.7.2012)

Ivor identifies the divergence between his own experience of being a student in higher education on a work-based learning route with his son's experience of being a student on a traditional route:

Ivor: I think to some extent being a student to me meant being a student full-time. I was only playing at being ...well I was only a student one day a week ... if I had been a full-time student than I would've done everything that my younger son was doing. (Int. 2: 2.7.2013)

Ivor's comment suggests that he is using a perception of what an authentic student experience is to contrast with his own, whereby his experience is positioned as less authentic, 'I was only playing at being ...well I was only a student one day a week'. Anna also used a comparison with her daughter's student experience signalling 'a traditional student' pathway proposing that her own as a work-based learner was different due to the attendance and mode of delivery. Her conversation with her daughter involved a comparison of their experiences:

Anna: My daughter finds it odd because obviously she's going to uni every day. She has said things about my degree and her degree and I'm like well 'you know I'm doing the same as you but I have to go to work'.  
(Int. 1: 2.10.2012)

By drawing a distinction between their experiences Anna's daughter puts Anna in a position of defending her role as a student. Anna acknowledges the differences suggesting that by straddling contexts of education as well as employment a more complex picture of being a student exists for work-based learners. As a work-based learner undertaking a part-time distance learning degree, Anna's experiences are seen by Anna to contrast with a student following a traditional route. Anna said that when talking to people she did not describe herself as a 'student' giving the reason, 'because I go to work' (Int. 1: 2.10.2012) indicating a decision by her to make part of her life invisible because of a lack of congruence between her experience of being a student and that of 'traditional' students.

The overlapping of occupational and educational domains in relation to identity was highlighted by other participants suggesting a difference

between students on tradition routes and their experience of being a work-based learner. For Laura, she believed that a merger of the domains of work and education enhanced her credibility as a work-based learner as opposed to students on traditional routes on social work degrees stating that work-based learners were more 'professionally mature' (FG. 1: 16.6.2012). In making sense of her experience Laura highlights differences with 'traditional' students against which she appraises her experience. As a work-based learner she says:

Laura: You've already got some credibility or a profession, whereas 'student' ... you could be green coming in on a completely new subject. I don't associate uni with what normal people do with parties and living there and ... cos my experience of university hasn't been like that ... if you're a work-based learner and a mature student you can't have those stereotypes assigned to you because that isn't the case, if anything you're juggling far more. (Int. 1: 9.10.2012)

Laura emphasises that being a student as a work-based learner is different from 'what normal people do' presenting a more complex picture for work-based learners, 'if anything you're juggling far more'. This contrast with traditional students points not only to a deficit perspective on what it means to be a work based student (not a real student) but also an enhanced view (more experienced and knowledgeable than a traditional student) on a traditional pathway. Laura's experience suggests that by contrasting the identities of 'student' and 'work-based learner' she attributed greater status to the latter placing emphasis on the opposing attributes that a work-based learner brings to higher education as a 'mature student' and having 'credibility or a profession'.

The lack of compatibility between the student role and familial roles was a feature of many participants with 16 participants (13 women and three men) highlighting this. This subgroup of 16 included all the men and women with dependent children and all of the women with independent children. Sonia described how being a student was impacting upon her son's life:

Sonia: He was like getting put to one side quite a lot to be honest and I did feel really guilty. One day when I heard him saying to his friend 'you can't come in because me mam is doing her uni work'. (FG. 2: 20.6.2012)

The visibility of her role as a student within the home and overlapping of the boundaries between the educational and domestic domains resulted in guilt and '*emotional labour*' (Watts and Waraker, 2008:110) for Sonia. This was amplified by her son's recognition that Sonia's role of student permeated the home and the impact this had on his interactions with friends and the family routines. Being a student and distracted from family relationships and roles was also evident in Anna's data. She describes her son's reaction when she was trying to study at home in 'the computer room' and appears withdrawn from her role as mother, 'mam you're always in there. Are you coming out, come on' (FG. 3: 17.7.2012). Anna signals a discord between her roles of mother and student and despite careful time management to accommodate a student role, Anna still experiences feelings of guilt due to the disruption to the family status quo and impact on her family relationships.

Donny's experience as a work-based learner suggests that being a student alongside his familial roles, was irreconcilable. The ensuing tension and conflict was overwhelming leaving him feeling defeated in his efforts to

manage the co-existence of multiple roles and related identities. In the following extract, he talks about time poverty and the cost of accommodating a student identity:

*Donny: Being a husband and a dad almost takes second place to being a student or a learner because you need to get these essays done, you need to get these (assignments) finished so you have to push everybody to one side and do that. So that sort of takes over in other areas where you would normally be fulfilling those roles ... (studying) grows like a huge cancer in your life that spills and grows and grows and you think, 'I can't do any more'. (Int. 2: 9.7.2013)*

Donny describes here the competing demands of various roles and how study intrudes on the domestic domain where uncomfortable choices were made at times to prioritise his studies. Being a student meant that he was unable to dedicate time to his familial roles of husband and father which became compromised and subordinated. His description of the degree as a 'cancer that ... spills and grows' suggests a pervasiveness which he resents and was potentially damaging for everyone. It also highlights that he felt he had no control over the demands his studies placed upon him and a feeling that he lacked agency.

Having a student identity that was predominantly salient was not without social and personal costs for many participants. The impact of this beyond their immediate domestic domain was identified only by women participants. Of the 13 women who identified tensions in straddling the domestic and educational domains, 10 also included the effect on relationships outside of the immediate family as well as within it whereas the three men out of five in the study who talked about the domestic impact confined their discussion to

the effect upon immediate family. Valerie talked about the impact of prioritising her studies and the decisions she took:

Valerie: When I wasn't (studying), and I was doing something else, I consistently was either thinking about it or feeling guilty so it got to a point where there was absolutely no point spending time with other people ... So it was easier just to say 'I'm putting that bit of my life on hold until I get the degree done'. (Int. 1: 19.10.2012)

In order to foreground her student role she felt she needed to compromise other roles albeit temporarily, suggesting they were irreconcilable whilst she was studying. Being a student disrupted existing roles and relationships and meant making difficult choices and sacrifices in order to manage the expectations she had of herself in relation to her studies, thereby maintaining a previously realised positive identity as a learner. However, the impact this decision had on others left her feeling guilty and in the period between academic years she attempted to remedy this situation:

Valerie: It was so full with trying to make up for feelings, so guilty for letting everybody else around you down and that was ... that's emotionally difficult when you're trying to kind of put right what you've done wrong ... I feel like I have missed out on three years of my husband and three years of my mom and three years of friends because my prioritisation was with the (national distance learning university) degree. (Int. 1: 19.10.2012)

For Valerie balancing the part-time nature of study was challenging and involved emotional labour that continued beyond the end of the degree in her efforts to rectify the perceived damage she felt responsible for. Like other women in this study Valerie talked about the impact studying had on her social relationships beyond her family. She felt she was 'letting everyone



else around you down' illustrating the particular pervasiveness of being a student that was discussed by women in this study. Having given paramountcy to her studies and allowing her student identity to be foregrounded in relation to other commitments created an unresolved conflict which left her feeling 'like I lost a lot of my identity in terms of my personal identity, I just felt that my life was subsumed with studying' (Int. 2: 13.8.2013). Valerie suggests here that in order to meet her own expectations of undertaking a degree she struggled to maintain a balance in her personal life emphasising a lack of congruence with being a student:

Valerie: I felt controlled as opposed to me being in control and that's rubbish really because I could have controlled it and said, right I'm gonna accept 50% across the board and have my life and I could have been in control of that but I didn't feel like that, I felt that it was controlling me all the time. (Int. 2: 13.8.2013)

Valerie's experience suggests she felt a lack of agency and appears to feel that her choices became limited. Studying meant having to make significant sacrifices that not only impacted upon family and friends but ultimately impacted upon how she perceived herself.

The lack of congruence experienced by participants between their role and related identity as a student and existing roles and related identities explored in this section highlights how different work-based learners understand their experiences of higher education in relation to a traditional student experience. The data also reveals the conflict and confusion that participants experience in 'how to be' (Moss and Pittaway, 2013:1006). How some of the challenges are managed is explored in the next section

which considers how participants overcome some of these challenges and to accommodate the role and associated identity of a student.

## **6.3 ACCOMMODATING ROLES AND IDENTITIES**

Whilst the previous theme explored the conflict and incongruence that participants experienced with other roles when being a student, the second overarching theme in this chapter explores how participants actively accommodate the role and associated identity of a student. The data identified key factors that impacted upon participants as students in higher education with the data highlighting the prevalence and consistency of:

- Being supported by others
- Accommodating the role and identity of a student at home

### **6.3.1 Being Supported by Others**

The support participants received from others such as colleagues, other students, partners, family and children was identified by all participants as enabling them to accommodate a student role and associated identity. I have already explored the ways that other students have impacted upon participants' experiences of this when I discussed 'learning communities' (Wenger et al, 2002) (section 5.5). This section focuses on the other sources of support identified by participants.

Dedicated study time allocated by employers as part of participants' work-based learning packages was a valued resource and provided material

recognition of their student role within the organisation. However, for Diane it is evident in the following extract that claiming this time was not straight forward. A study day allocated by her employer did not initially result in any real benefits due to the reality of managing a workload alongside study commitments:

Diane: We're allowed one study day off a week and I was taking that initially and it got to the point where I was thinking 'I'm just not taking it any more' because I was finding out on the other four days I was working the same hours equivalent to the five days. (FG. 2: 20.6.2012)

Diane challenged this and found her manager supportive in providing the necessary space to accommodate her studies, 'Once I brought it to their attention they actually stepped back and went 'actually we want you to make sure you take your study days' (FG. 2: 20.6.2012). This renegotiation of time was, Diane suggested, instrumental in managing the demands of both her role as a worker and that of a student, it 'helped massively' (FG. 2: 20.6.2012).

For Carl, the recognition of his student identity also made a material difference to his practice. He found that the privileges afforded students when forthcoming created clarity and shared expectations of his student role and related identity between him and his manager leading to a positive learning experience. Carl recognised the protection in terms of caseload that his manager offered him due to his position as a student, 'you are a student, you're not an extra pair of hands' (Int. 2: 9.7.2013). Whilst he was initially frustrated by this, as he believed he was capable of undertaking more work, he came to appreciate the opportunity it created for a more selective approach to case work. Allocation of work was based more explicitly upon his learning needs rather than meeting organisational

requirements, 'I've been allowed to have a look at the referral list and select what cases I've wanted to get the learning opportunities' (Int. 2: 9.7.2013), thereby providing an authentic learning experience.

Some participants recognised university resources and features within the curriculum design that aided the process of accommodating a student role. This influenced their initial decision to undertake the degree (section 4.5) but also enabled them to challenge existing identities and as work-based learners accommodate the student role. Lillian says of a study skills module:

*Lillian: I think (the study skills module) helped because it made me think about what I needed to do to be able to get myself through the course and about changing things to make it work for me ... and I think I had to be quite ruthless really about putting certain things aside. (Int. 2: 13.8.2013)*

This module appears to have provided the necessary endorsement for Lillian to renegotiate domestic roles and family relationships. 'Changing things to make it work for me' enabled her to foreground her needs as a student and pave the way for a more salient student identity. For some participants on the national distance learning degree the design of the programme delivery reduced conflict with other roles enabling the family status quo to be maintained. Distance learning allowed Laura to 'mould (the programme) round everything else' (Int. 1: 19.10.2012) rather than having to commit totally to a degree programme with the accompanying risks and academic uncertainties. This programme allowed her to maintain her identity as a 'good mother' in the way she wanted to without what she

viewed as the standard of parenting being compromised and minimising any perceived dissonance with her role within the family, it 'allowed me to still parent Connor to a good standard and work in the evening and the resources fit with me' (FG. 1: 16.6.2012). This extract highlights how women participants perceived their role in families where women prioritise other people's needs above their own.

Support was also forthcoming from families enabling participants to manage other commitments and creating the space to accommodate a student role and thereby the opportunity to participate in higher education. Laura considers her role as a mother in relation to being a student recognising that this required renegotiation of parenting with her partner:

*Laura: I'm such an 'all or nothing mother' I would quite happily run away with all the jobs for Connor and just get on with them and Alan would just assist me whereas the degree gave him the chance to do more of the parenting. (Int. 2: 19.9.2013)*

Her need to manage these competing demands in a way that gave her some control, and did not comprise her identity as a 'good mother', is evident here with her partner providing the support she needed. Donny's wife also supported him to be a student at home and created time and space for him away from familial roles, 'I was sitting at a computer and Minnie was sitting playing in another room and her mum would say, 'leave dad alone'. Hilary gave up a full-time salary and recognised the support of her partner as critical in enabling her to manage the financial repercussions of becoming a student:

*Hilary: My family were really supportive because I gave up a full-time wage ... so as a result of that my husband had to work away for two*

years so he wasn't around ... You sacrifice so much but they do as well.  
(FG. 2: 20.6.12)

Hilary identifies 'sacrifices' that occur as a result of being a student, which is echoed in 16 of the other participants' data who told of the financial costs, lack of time and impact on family relationships. Being a student for Hilary meant pressures on time and a renegotiation of the boundaries between multiple roles to manage the tensions across educational and domestic domains. This required the development of creative strategies and negotiations with family members. Hilary identifies how she combined her studies with time spent with her 10 year old son when approaching a law exam, 'he was so supportive ... the only way I could spend time with him is we actually made flash cards on the Human Right Act' (FG. 2: 20.6.12). Hilary, like nearly all the other participants, signaled practical and active ways in which she exercised agency and sought to take control over the changes in her life in order to develop and sustain a position as a student. Perceiving the benefits of her studies for her son also appears important in helping her to legitimise her participation in higher education.

Support from family came in many forms enabling participants to maintain their role as student and continue on the social work degree. Anna felt her continuation on the course was compromised due to monetary pressures when her salary was reduced as part of the secondment package from the Local Authority. Anna's sister stepped in to shore up her depleted finances:

Anna: My family were really supportive 'cos there was stages where I just thought I can't do it any longer 'cos I was so hard up and my sister sort of agreed and she was buying us shopping every week. She was saying 'no

do it, do it ... I'll buy your shopping, get us a list of what you want' and that's what she did. (FG. 3: 17.7.12)

Anna's experience demonstrates the risks to financial independence associated with study for mature students who are likely to have already established financial commitments. The support of her family stabilised her precarious financial situation and as a result of this support she was able to continue with her studies.

This theme highlights that the support given to some participants by others enabled them to manage the challenges and conflicts as work-based learners entering higher education. It often required practical responses such as the provision of resources along with active negotiation and renegotiation of roles and relationships at work and at home, with participants making difficult choices and compromises. This support facilitated participants in accommodating and maintaining a student role and the related identity.

### **6.3.2 Accommodating a Student Role and Identity at Home**

The second sub-theme in this section explores the variety of ways participants sought to accommodate a student role and being a student at home. Undertaking study in higher education means accommodating a new 'student' identity alongside established identities in both occupational as well as domestic domains. How being a student impacted within the workplace has already been discussed (sections 5.3 and 6.2.1). Being a student at home was highlighted in the data from 16 of the 20 participants,

13 women and three men. Of the two women and two men who did not talk about domestic domains, the two women did not have children and the two men had independent children. The 16 participants included all those with dependent children and all of the women with children, either dependent or independent.

For many of the women in this study their identity as a mother was highly salient. Allowing one identity to be salient in any given context and at a given time enables potential conflict to be managed and multiple identities to co-exist across a variety of domains (Stryker, 2008). Agency was evident in the efforts made by women participants to accommodate a student identity and manage the conflict that occurred with their identity as mother. This conflict was ongoing throughout the higher education journey for some participants. This proved challenging for Lillian and her extract points to how she overcame the initial 'struggle' that resulted from the transition into higher education:

*Lillian: (I) put my needs before other people's which doesn't come easy does it as a wife and mother. So I think for the first year I did struggle ... I think it took me 12 months to evolve from being a worker and a mom and a wife. (Int. 2:13.8.2013)*

Lillian's experience signals a role within the family that means putting her family's needs before her own. It was through attending the course and being part of a 'learning community' (Lave and Wenger, 1991:29) that enabled Lillian to become a student. Time to study amongst work and domestic commitments became an important commodity and a critical factor that facilitated participants in managing the requirements of their degree



programmes. In the following extract, Lillian describes the significance of time for her:

Lillian: My life just went on the way it was and all I had was this one Tuesday in every month, that Tuesday was for me. (Int. 2: 13.8.2013)

Lillian began to accommodate her new role of student by renegotiating her role and relationships within the family with some adjustments to domestic responsibilities, 'I learned to let go' (Int. 1: 20.12.2012). In managing the competing demands of work and domestic life, where the focus was on meeting the needs of others, the day for university attendance for the first year of the degree programme was time that Lillian claimed for herself and dedicated to study. Whilst she saw this resource as limited in terms of the amount of time available to her, it was 'all I had', it was vital in creating the space she needed to manage her role of student. From the initial struggle to accommodate a student role Lillian talks about the opportunities participation in higher education provided and the meaning she attached to it, 'I'm not just someone's wife, someone's mother. I'm more balanced now' (Int. 1:12. 2012). Her experience illustrates how by becoming a student existing identities were disrupted thereby making higher education empowering and an opportunity to extend her identity beyond the domestic domain, 'it's taught me that there are things outside the house and house work' (Int. 1:12. 2012).

Sonia, who in addition to her role as a manager in a social care service and a student on a social work programme, was a mother to a young son and a carer for her mother. She describes the management of multiple roles and the movement between roles, 'I feel like I wear 101 different hats sometimes and

you don't even realise that you're doing it' (Int. 1: 19.12.2012). Sonia's reference to different hats signals the multiplicity of roles that she manages, the fluidity of movement and habitual nature of the transitions between them. The multiplicity of roles creates a potential for conflict and tension between them that needs to be managed. For Morag, the management of various roles and associated identities in different domains is illustrated in the following extract:

Morag: I think I did keep everything separate. If I was here (university) I was a student if I was at home I wasn't or I might be for two hours later on in the evening. I don't think there was a sort of blurring. I did keep them separate. (Int. 2: 11.7.2013)

Here Morag describes a process of exercising agency whereby she attempted to keep roles and resulting identities contained within contexts and compartmentalised. In this instance agency becomes apparent in the salience of identities within contexts, with the primacy given to one identity being determined by context. By reinforcing the boundaries that separated these Morag hoped to manage the tensions and potential for conflict in order to maintain the status quo at home to 'lessen the impact (of being a student) on everybody else' (Int. 2: 11.7.2013). In an attempt not to appear distracted from domestic and familial roles, study became a hidden activity for Morag but this strategy proved stressful:

Morag: I think most of the things went tickety boo and didn't really change. And when I was having my melt down in the middle of the night they were all asleep anyway and didn't see it ... They're like, 'oh well, we knew you'd do it'. I said 'yeah, because you haven't seen the stressful bits you haven't seen any struggle because I've done it all on my own'. (Int. 2: 11.7.2013)

Morag describes in this narrative the challenges of managing her domestic role and maintaining an equilibrium for the family at a personal cost. Whilst she managed domestic responsibilities with some minor compromises, such as slippage with the standard of the housework she had previously maintained, she felt there was minimal visible evidence of compromise and accommodation of her student role by family members. In order to limit the impact on her family of her being a student Morag insulated them from the demands of this role and became a 'hidden learner' (Lillis, 2001) (section 2.4.2), that is when she studied at home she did this privately and unobserved by her family, an experience she seemed to find isolating. Being a hidden learner was a particular feature of women's accounts in this study and whilst three of the men with young children identified tensions between being a student and being a father, they had not become 'hidden learners' but had negotiated space with their partners within the domestic domain to manage their studies.

Of the five men participants in this study, three of them had children under the age of ten and all three talked about their role as a father and participating in their children's lives, resulting in tensions with their role of student. Unlike the experiences of eight of the 13 women who tended to conceal their studies either from their children, their partner or both, the three men were more consistently supported by their partners in being students within the domestic domain. When the men talked about the impact, they did so in terms of being lacking the necessary time and identified time management strategies for incorporating this role. Keith

identified the need to plan his time more strategically by negotiation with his wife:

Keith: We are both asking each other, 'when am I getting my time to do this'. And it's always been a balance for me as well, this is a real personal thing in the sense that you know, I've chosen to do what I do for a living and I've chosen to be a student at this time and I know how much work and time that should take. (Int. 1: 17.10.2012)

Keith's extract highlights the conflict and the impact on family relationships of him being a student requiring the negotiation of time. This extract also suggests a legitimacy to this negotiation rather than requiring a more covert approach evidenced by some of the women participants.

Undertaking the social work degree and managing the impact on domestic and family lives required participants to develop a range of strategies, although for men and women these were different. Unlike the men in this study, women talked about being responsible for the domestic and family arrangements and the complex readjustments they needed to make in order to accommodate their studies:

Anna: I think I have to be very structured now, for example, we've got the exam coming up in October I know that I'm too tired after work to revise, so I set my alarm for 5 o'clock and get up at 5 o'clock every morning and do two hours revision before I walk the dogs, before I go to work and then when I come back you know that's time with the kids to see what they've been doing in the day. (Int. 1:2.10.2012)

To incorporate the demands of study into an already demanding routine, Anna developed a daily strategy for the careful management of her roles weaving study, domestic and occupational demands together. Time

management however, also required careful planning over longer periods of time:

Anna: It seems that I'm kind of working and studying after work, weekends, taking my annual leave to catch up on work so I haven't had a holiday for three years. Don't seem to have any type of social life ... I might make lunch on a Sunday and invite everyone so I can see everyone together rather than seeing my mum separate, my daughter separate and try and do everything in one go over Sunday lunch. (Int. 2:2.7.2013)

Anna's studies appear to dominate her time creating conflict in the domestic domain that she found challenging. Identities co-existing in both domestic and academic spheres means each role jostling for space and intricate planning to manage competing demands and family relationships. Despite meticulous planning to meet all her obligations Anna still experienced feelings of frustration in her efforts to fulfil family commitments and her attempts to limit the impact of her studies on them.

All of the women with children positioned themselves centrally within the domestic domain. Morag talked about her domestic responsibilities and how she adjusted these to accommodate her role as a student:

Morag: House work's just gone to pot, that's what went, household standards are very below par because when I wasn't working I was doing assignment work, I work every weekend so that's been the major impact ... people have to give me notice to come round so I can scrabble the rubbish into a bin bag it's just, the ironing, everything's just piling up around my ears and that's been really frustrating. (Int. 1:19.12.2012)

The challenges Morag faced by accommodating the role of student alongside work resulted in a lack of control over domestic routines. She

recognises how she takes responsibility for these household tasks within her family linking this to cultural expectations:

Morag: I have a husband but he will help out but he really is typical northern man, does not see it as his role at all. He has done *my* dishes *for me* or he has tidied *my* living room *for me*. He leaves me alone when I've got work to do which is great but with regards to the house it's always been very much my department and he hasn't really picked up that mantle while I was doing other things. (Int. 1:19.12.2012)

The gendering of domestic chores is evident in this extract with Morag stating that in her family these were 'very much my department' with small short term concessions gained with negotiation. Morag's experience in this respect is culturally embedded and signals gendered family roles presenting her husband as a 'typical northern man'.

Balancing competing demands and maintaining the status quo for families was a real struggle for many participants. The age of children was often a factor for women participants when considering the feasibility of undertaking the degree in the first place (section 4.3) as well as how they managed their time in higher education. Laura, like other women participants, positioned her role of mother as salient. She said of her son:

Laura: He's been my priority. Everything else had to fit round, and I think I've managed that pretty well although I got to say the last sort of six months of the degree he was starting to say, 'Are you doing that again', and cos he was up later at night. (Int. 1:9.10.2012)

The commitment to her role as a mother is evident here. Laura stresses that studying did not impact upon family life or her capacity as a mother suggesting a fear that being a student may be perceived as a distraction

from her responsibilities as a mother. Her efforts to conceal her studies from her son by leaving studying until after his bedtime became more challenging as he grew older and his routines changed. Laura however, was able to justify her participation in higher education because of perceived benefits for her son Connor, 'I think that's been really good for him see ... He does his own work and he does his reading just like I did my research for my (assignments)' (Int. 2: 19.9.2013). Laura signals here being a role model for Connor. Being a 'good mother' at the same time as undertaking the social work degree created a real tension for Laura with competing demands and responsibilities. Becoming what she conceived to be a role model appears to provide a further justification for participation in higher education.

Transitioning and moving between multiple identities is for some participants in some contexts, more manageable. Diane believed that as her children became more independent she was able to create the space to undertake the social work degree alongside her role as a mother. Having dismissed doing the degree when her children were young she became a student at the same time as her daughter left home for university. The co-existence of multiple roles then became more manageable:

Diane: There'll be times when I know ... I've got to take my focus away from my study and that's the time I've got to focus on the kids and be a mother and it's never been a problem ... I could give myself the time to study, I could go to work and come home and it wasn't impacting on my children, they weren't having to suffer. (Int. 2: 11.7.2013)

For Diane, her role of mother appears to be prioritised with her making efforts to ensure that her studies meant her children, 'weren't having to

suffer'. Diane is able to renegotiate roles and move fluidly between roles by re-directing and re-focusing her energies when she felt this was needed to accommodate the needs of her children and 'be a mother' (Int. 2: 11.7.2013). The complexity of managing multiple roles and the identities based upon these is recognised by Diane. The impact this can have over time was highlighted for her by her journey through higher education:

*Diane: Part of you is a parent, part of you is a daughter, a part of you is a wife ... and then you're reclaiming all them parts back and saying, 'I'm still all that but I'm me as well, I'm an individual and I need to be seen as somebody other than a 'mother', other than a 'daughter' ... it has taken (undertaking the degree) to make me realise'. (Int. 2: 11.7.2013)*

This extract demonstrates how multiple identities co-exist but it also makes evident a tension with Diane feeling defined and limited by these identities. The extract appears to suggest that the social work degree helped her to claim her identity as an individual rather than one that is bound by identifiable roles, 'I'm still all that but I me as well'. Higher education in this sense became a site for identity construction and thus an empowering experience for Diane.

Hilary also recognised the competing demands in her life as a worker, partner and a mother but also felt able to separate these. However, she found this impossible to achieve as a student with this role being very intrusive:

*Hilary: Never brought my work home to my children, but at university you have to actively do it because there's so many roles to juggle because you are going out on placement, you are studying for exams and you're writing essays all the time as well as reading and researching and then being a mum and wife. (Int. 1: 1.10.2012)*



Whilst she still found the tasks of being a student intrusive Hilary created strategies that enabled her to accommodate multiple roles and to manage the conflict. She signals in the following reflection how identities are time and context specific and how a particular pro-active strategy enabled these to co-exist:

Hilary: I had to physically put music on in my car to switch off from being a social work student. Drive home to music in the car to turn off with whatever emotions I had dealt with through the day so I could go in and be a fresh mom to my kids not bringing in any work; and likewise driving to work as well I would do exactly the same, put music on in my car and you can actually, you know you're telling yourself, 'right, I'm going into work mode now, I'm going into mum mode, I'm going into wife mode, I'm going into daughter mode'. (FG. 2: 20.6.2012)

Hilary identifies a strategy of using music and physical movement from one context to another to facilitate the transition between roles. Time and context were critical here and resulted in the configuration of overlapping layers of identity co-existing with one another.

Participants identified a range of ways in which they attempted to manage the challenges and conflicts in order to accommodate the needs of a student. Whilst this meant making difficult choices and compromises for some, for others it also created new and empowering opportunities. The two themes including four sub-themes identified in this chapter have enabled the exploration of the social and personal opportunities and challenges revealed by participants when undertaking a social work degree. The four sub-themes include, 'being a student: conflict with roles and identities within the workplace'; 'being a student: incongruence with roles

and identities outside the workplace'; 'being supported by others' and 'accommodating the role and identity of a student at home'. Having drawn upon the extracts of a broad range of participants, the next section presents a case study, Mary's story. This case study offers a narrative of experience illustrating how all four themes merge in one telling case (Mitchell, 1984).

#### **6.4 MARY'S STORY – '*We can't wait for you to finish Mam*'**

Mary was 45 years of age with 15 years of experience in social care when she was seconded onto the national distance learning university degree. Accommodating the student role meant conflict between a range of already established identities within both occupational and domestic domains but also provided opportunities for Mary.

The label of 'student' was challenging for Mary with a particular view of being a student being presented to her by friends, 'you're going to be in the pub most of the day because you know, that's what students do' (Int. 2: 13.8.2013) and her own experience being presented by Mary as more challenging and arduous offering a counter narrative, 'that was my student life really, living at work (until) 9 o'clock at night and then going back on a weekend for the peace and quiet (to study) because you didn't get it at home which was hard'. (Int. 2: 13.8.2013). Combining the occupational and educational domains became an essential, if unwelcome, strategy for Mary. Her workspace also became the study space after she finished work because

she felt she was unsupported at home and had no authorised space there to study.

The consequence of being a student was accompanied by a sense of guilt that by undertaking the social work degree she had disrupted the status quo of the family. Being a student resulted in lack of time dedicated for her family with her studies being seen by her family and herself as disrupting the family's domestic routines, 'they found it frustrating that I wasn't there to do the dinners on a weekend and water and feed them' (Int. 2: 13.8.2013). Whilst Mary tried to renegotiate relationships to accommodate her student role she continued to experience guilt at being distracted from family relationships, 'we can't wait for you to finish Mam, we just want to be able to see you again' (FG. 1: 16.6.2012).

Lack of time and the ensuing tensions between roles and commitments in relation to work, home and study meant that in addition to these challenges Mary recognised that her own needs were overlooked, 'my needs just didn't exist and it was just the requirements of the (national distance learning university), the requirements of (place of work) and then my children' (Int. 1: 19.10.2012). Mary struggled to negotiate the necessary space at home for her studies and felt overwhelmed by competing demands resulting in her being more isolated from her family, 'I just used to go back to work to do it (studying) because it was just easier to get away from family (Int. 2: 13.8.2013)'. Mary's experience signals the emotional labour of work-based learners in higher education balancing a range of life commitments which involved her experiencing 'many crises throughout the course' (Int. 2: 13.8.2013) including

the end of her marriage of 30 years stating that, 'I was quite bitter towards my husband really for the lack of support. (Int. 2: 13.8.2013). Whilst Mary had endeavoured to take control of her studies she struggled to resolve some of the conflicts it created and having finished the degree she felt the 'emotional labour' continued, 'I think that rollercoaster just kept going on' (Int. 2: 13.8.2013).

The dual positions within her employing organisation of worker and student created challenges for Mary due to her existing relationships with colleagues who, 'just saw me as the manager' (Int. 2: 13.8.2013). Mary was keen to take control and by exercising agency negotiated space to ensure her student identity was foregrounded and salient, 'I'm not here as a manager I am a student social worker and I would ask that you allow me to be a student social worker and treat me like one' (Int. 2: 13.8.2013). For Mary, accommodating a student identity was facilitated by the recognition by her managers of this repositioning within her workplace. This was manifested in the allocation of study time, an essential commodity for a work-based learner accommodating a student role alongside her other commitments, 'if I hadn't been given the time I would've really struggled. Really struggled' (Int. 2: 13.8.2013).

Undertaking the social work degree presented many challenges but also created an empowering experience for Mary, 'it's all quite life changing really' (Int. 2: 13.8.2013) resulting in personal as well as professional change.

## **6.5 CONCLUSION**

This chapter has explored the data in relation to the third research question

*- What personal and social challenges and opportunities do students identify whilst undertaking work-based learning routes in social work education?*

The two overarching themes reveal the challenges encountered by work-based learners entering higher education including accommodating a student role and a related identity alongside established roles and identities. This resulted in a layering of identities which co-existed across multiple domains – occupational, educational and domestic. The data reveals that students initially experienced a lack of congruence between their identities of ‘student’ and other identities in part resulting from their perspective on what ‘being a student’ meant. Roles within families influenced by gendered expectations are also evident in the narratives of students and the conflict they experienced within the domestic domain, a particularly strong feature of women’s experiences.

Entering higher education meant that roles needed to be negotiated and renegotiated in order to become and be a student. Women emphasised the need to care for others, prioritising the needs of others above their own and how this impacted upon them being students. For some women, higher education presented opportunities for new identities not centred on family and domestic life and that whilst for some this had been emancipating, it also meant sacrifices and losses requiring a complex range of strategies to manage the personal and social journey through higher education and beyond. Participants often struggled to manage the competing demands of multiple roles and created a range of strategies to enable the corresponding

identities to co-exist. However, this renegotiation appeared to be an ongoing challenge, suggesting that identities remain in a state of continual negotiation involving constant specific decisions and strategies.

## CHAPTER 7

# DISCUSSION

### 7.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter seven presents the findings arising from this study, drawing on the theoretical perspective of structural symbolic interactionism to inform the discussion. In section 7.2, the chapter begins by outlining the gap in the literature that this thesis aims to address and revisits the research questions that underpin this study. A discussion of the findings in section 7.3 is divided into two main sections ‘the roles and identities of work-based learners’ followed by ‘the transitions of work-based learners’. Together this discussion makes visible key experiences of work-based learners in this study. This is followed by the proposal of a heuristic in section 7.4 that aims to provide a theoretical framework for understanding the student journey for work-based learners on social work degrees. Section 7.5 provides a critical evaluation of a range of methodological issues arising from the study adding to the rigour of the research. The implications of this thesis and the study on which it is based are considered in relation to a range of stakeholders in section 7.6. This thesis is particularly relevant in the current context of major reform in social work education and the revisioning of work-based learning. Areas for future research have been identified as a result of this

study and are explored in section 7.7 with the final section 7.8, providing concluding comments and reflections.

## **7.2 THE GAP IN THE LITERATURE AND THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This thesis contributes to debates about social work education and the identities of work-based learners. A range of literature has already been discussed addressing the policy context relating to ‘non-traditional’ students (section 2.2.1), widening participation (section 2.2.2) and work-based learning (section 2.2.3). The broad range of empirical studies exploring the identity of students in relation to educational domains (section 2.4.1), occupational domains (section 2.4.2) and domestic domains (section 2.4.3) reveal some of the challenges shaping the experiences of students.

Drawing together these fields and through a lens of structural symbolic interactionism bridged to transition (section 2.3), this thesis builds on current understandings of the student journey into and through higher education.

This includes providing insights into how the concepts of salience and transition enable the accommodation of multiple roles and their related identities. This thesis also extends current understandings by revealing how identities shaped by everyday interactions affect the participation of work-based learners in higher education. At a time when work-based learning is experiencing a resurgence in social work education this thesis provides understanding of student experiences within two university based programmes, one face-to-face and one distance learning identifying similarities and some differences in experiences.



The research questions for this study (section 3.2) aimed to address gaps in the literature by generating data that make visible factors impacting upon work-based learners' journey from unqualified to qualified practitioner. The questions were:

1. What factors influence students' decisions to undertake the social work degree via work-based learning routes?
2. How do students experience the educational journey?
3. What personal and social challenges and opportunities do students identify whilst undertaking work-based learning routes in social work education?

The research questions were purposefully broad allowing participants to identify what was significant for them rather than this being pre-determined by the researcher. They formed the basis of the study and the findings in this thesis.

### **7.3. THE FINDINGS**

Data in relation to all three research questions are discussed in the findings organised in the following two main subsections firstly, 'roles and identities of work-based learners' in section 7.3.1 and secondly, 'higher education: transitions for work-based learners' in section 7.3.2. The findings relate to

two social work programmes within the North East of England and in the main are therefore relevant to this context of social work education.

### **7.3.1 Roles and Identities of Work-based Learners**

From a perspective of structural symbolic interactionism, roles as well as identities were highlighted in all participants' narratives of experiences of higher education and were a key issue in relation to all three research questions in terms of *becoming* and *being* a student. Stryker (2008) conceptualises *roles* as a set of expectations and norms attached to particular positions and performed through interactions with others whereas *identities*, tied to these roles, are the internalisation of these role expectations and form the basis of how people understand who they are (section 2.3.1).

All the participants in this study were over 21 and therefore as mature students (McGivney, 2003) entered education with an already established set of work-based as well as personal identities (Watts and Waraker, 2008; Crisp and Maidment, 2009) spanning both occupational and domestic domains. Prior to entering higher education these identities included, for example, 'worker', 'learner', 'friend', 'daughter', 'mother/father', 'husband/wife/partner', 'carer' and 'housekeeper' with participants managing this multiplicity in routine ways. The data revealed that entering higher education required participants to engage in what Stryker defined as 'identity change processes' (2008:21) with university providing a new

domain, within which participants occupied the role of a 'student' resulting in the formation of a student identity.

The tension and conflict between the multiple identities of work-based learners spanning different contexts was a key theme within the data of all participants. A structural symbolic interactionist approach to identity recognises that in a modern and multifaceted society, individuals will occupy a plurality of roles and therefore develop multiple identities, one resulting from each role (Simon, 2004; Stryker and Burke, 2000; Stryker, 2008; Burke and Stets, 2009). Echoing this theoretical construct of identity (2.3.1), the data underlines the significance of context to identity, with identity being embedded in varying social contexts and shaped by structural influences (section 3.3) and patterns of social construction. Torres et al argue that society is:

*'patterned by large social structures of power and oppression that interact with individual identities in both particular and systematic ways' (2009:587).*

The data presented in this thesis shows how traces of these 'patterns of large social structures', relating in particular to participants' social backgrounds (in particular gender and social class), are lived out. The data also reveals how social structures impact on opportunities and constraints in relation to participation in higher education. In addition, structural symbolic interactionism as a theoretical approach to human experience has, combined with narrative inquiry (section 3.4), facilitated an emphasis on the meanings that people bring to their journeys through education. In combination, these traditions contribute to understandings about how people make meanings in

everyday existence. The thesis has illustrated how the tiny and apparently inconsequential details of everyday life constitute possibilities for agency and identity, in this case shaping opportunities for participating in work-based learning trajectories.

Both structural symbolic interactionism and narrative inquiry focus on *meanings* in the context of social processes. For structural symbolic interactionists roles are based on common meanings that inform social processes and are themselves informed by social process. Similarly, narrative inquiry is based upon the ontological assumption that people attribute meaning to experiences through stories (Somers, 1994; Gubrium and Holstein, 1998; Elliott, 2005; Phoenix and Sparkes, 2008; Riessman, 2008; Phoenix et al, 2010; Spector-Mersel, 2010; Andrews et al, 2013). *Meanings* therefore create a bridge between these two theoretical traditions and it is attention to such meanings that is at the core of this thesis.

In addition to personal narratives and understandings that have been foregrounded in this thesis, it is important to recognise that narrative inquiry also provides ways of understanding the dynamic relationship between individuals and society, for example through the notion of ‘public narratives’ (section 3.6) echoing a central tenet of structural symbolic interactionism, that being the dynamic interrelationship between individuals and society. People draw from a range of public narratives as broader social frames of reference, or templates, within which they position themselves, or are positioned by others to create standards against which to measure individual experience. In participants’ comments and narratives there are

clear traces of three key public narratives underlining the position that personal narratives are not ‘free fictions’ (May 2004:171): these were, the public narratives of ‘a traditional versus non-traditional student’, ‘the higher value of academic qualifications or what has been referred to as the ‘qualifications premium’ and ‘gendered family roles’. The existence of a ‘public narrative’ of ‘a traditional versus non-traditional student’ emerges in a number of studies (McGivney, 2003; Harris et al, 2008; Gilardi and Guglielmetti, 2011; Merrill, 2012; Moss and Pittaway, 2013) and portrays ‘traditional’ students in higher education as having a number of characteristics and behaviours including being young, on a linear progression from school to higher education, attending a full-time campus based programme and practiced in academic skills (section 2.2.1). Participants in this study presented their experiences as being different from ‘those of a ‘traditional student’ and therefore ‘inauthentic’ in a fundamental way and at times described experiences that presented a counter narrative to a ‘traditional’ student. Working with such a public narrative made the transition towards *becoming* and *being* a student more challenging when embarking on higher education and through the course of their trajectories.

The public narrative of the higher value of academic qualifications or what has been referred to as ‘a qualifications premium’ (Watts and Waraker, 2008:106) was strongly evident across participants’ comments and narratives. The public narrative of the ‘qualifications premium’ refers to the professionalisation of the workforce and has been explored in a range of literature (Watts and Waraker, 2008; Beddoe, 2011; Daniels and Brooker, 2014) (section 2.4.2). This public narrative was signalled consistently in the

accounts of participants, highlighting their position as unqualified practitioners, and is embedded within a broader debate of work-based learning within higher education (Boud and Solomon, 2001; Neary, 2002; Barnett and Di Napoli, 2008; Harris et al, 2008; Manthorpe et al, 2011; Merrill, 2012; Daniels and Brooker, 2014) (section 2.23). This public narrative was both a motivating factor for participants who wanted opportunities for professional development, and a pressure in terms of their visibility as students and the lack of recognition of this role.

The third and final public narrative that is signalled strongly in the data is that of 'gendered family roles'. This public narrative (often referred to as a dominant discourse on gender) has been long since theorised in feminist research and focuses on the way that family roles (mother, father, wife, husband, daughter, son) are socially constructed as gendered in particular ways and underpinned by power relations (Baxter and Britton, 2001; Bowl, 2001; McRae, 2003; Reay et al, 2010; Chambers, 2012; Khonou et al, 2012). This public narrative shaped participants' expectations of themselves and their interactions with others in ways that both facilitated and impeded becoming and being a student with women consistently experiencing tensions and conflict in relation to this.

Data in this study indicated that tension occurred when embedded personal identities were challenged and public narratives produced templates for *being* a student that were not readily compatible with the existing ways of being. An example of this was the foregrounding of 'student' identities within work or domestic domains creating conflict with other identities. Hird

cautions against conceptualising an individual as a composition of parts (1998). She argues that a composition of parts suggests an integrated and stable whole and goes on to say that when integration does not occur then the individual is pathologised (1998). The conflict and tension for participants, between identities and lack of integration results in a number of challenges and perceived failings. However, Hird (1998) argues that conflict and tension are productive with Wenger (2010) claiming that a new understanding of identity can occur at the boundaries where conflict and tension happens. This is evident in the data when becoming a student presented opportunities for the renegotiation of family roles and relationships as well as identities.

The data in this study highlights the complexity of identity with work-based learners straddling occupational, educational and domestic domains resulting in identity being fluid and complex rather than fixed and stable. Structural symbolic interactionism and identity theory provides a framework within which this complexity can be understood. The work-based learners in this study regularly experienced 'identity change processes' (Stryker, 2008:21) to facilitate movement across domains. Salience (section 2.3.1.1), central to identity theory, is a key notion here. Stryker suggests that role choice is '*a consequence of identity salience*' (2008:20). Commitment to identities, mediated through affective and interactional factors, both facilitates and impedes the movement between roles with the salience of a particular identity at a given time being affected by contextual and relational factors. Stryker describes commitment as:

*'the degree that one's relationships to a set of others depend on being a particular kind of person and playing out particular roles, one is committed to being that kind of person' (2008:20).*

For the mature work-based learners who took part in this study *becoming* a student required a new role to be accommodated which disrupted existing identities and was accompanied by uncertainty about 'how to be' (Moss and Pittaway, 2013:1006). In this way commitment to existing identities was challenged.

The data in this study suggested that commitment to existing identities is a core concern for work-based learners. *Becoming* and *being* a student means commitment to existing identities is placed under strain during the higher education journey of participants. Tension and conflict arise between competing roles and complex negotiations are required between the overlapping educational, occupational and domestic domains navigated by participants. In order to manage these conflicts there was a tendency amongst some participants to separate out identities, with valued identities such as 'worker' or 'mother' being salient in order to protect them. Identity salience in this sense can be perceived as being impacted upon by agency in the decisions made by individuals.

The findings in this thesis highlight a range of pro-active strategies that participants utilised in an effort to manage the conflict and maintain commitments. For some participants, compromises were made in relation to various roles such as less time with friends and family and a reduced



income in order to accommodate all the roles. These strategies focused on facilitating the co-existence of roles and their respective identities positioned within different domains allowing for movement between them.

The next section explores how entering higher education meant that participants needed to reposition themselves in relation to a new context and what this meant for participants with different educational backgrounds.

### **7.3.1.1 Changing Identities: the Challenges and Opportunities of Higher Education**

A consistent theme within the data was the way in which participants positioned themselves in relation to higher education prior to undertaking the degree and during their educational journey and the changes that occurred in becoming a student. As a mature student, most of the work-based learners in this study had families and financial commitments such as mortgages. These roles and responsibilities shaped participants' identities as providers and impacted upon their decision making and in turn created barriers to participating in traditional full time routes in higher education. Stryker argues that identities tied to existing networks affect people's participation in activities that compromise these identities (2008). The two programmes studied provided a route that limited the financial impact of entering higher education compared to a traditional route due to the support offered by employers (section 3.4.1). The data from all except two of the participants indicated that the work-based learning route was the only viable option that was available to them due to their existing financial obligations and need to maintain their identity as a provider for the family. The

potential loss of income affected the timing of undertaking the degree for four of the 20 participants and resulted in delayed entry. For women participants, a loss of income when entering higher education meant that their desire to maintain established material standards for their children acted as a source of stress and was accompanied by feelings of guilt. Over half of all participants were concerned about their ability to provide for their families and undertook additional work to maintain long term financial obligations such as mortgages (sections 4.2, 6.3.4). The concept of commitment in identity theory here provides a way of understanding the decision making of work-based learners with work-based learning routes providing alternative options to traditional routes that were not seen to compromise identities to which participants were committed. However, the data also reveals that commitments to identities are not fixed and can be negotiated if the risks, such as financial hardship, are rationalised.

Undertaking the social work degree for all participants meant adapting to a new context and accommodating the new role of student which, as Watts and Waraker argue, requires '*some measure of identity change*' (208:107). For participants in this study without a first degree, university was considered remote and to some degree alien. This finding was particularly relevant to participants at the stage of making the decision to undertake the social work degree (the focus of research question one) and also during their educational journey (the focus of research question two and three). For some participants entering higher education meant challenging existing learner identities that had been shaped by prior educational experiences.

These experiences had often served to reinforce their concept of higher education as an elitist educational provision.

The data in this study indicated that there was a dissonance between the public narrative of 'a traditional student' and participants' experiences of higher education suggesting that participants understood their own identity in relation to other groups of students on different routes (Chapman, 2012-13; Esmond, 2012). The public narrative of 'a traditional student' presents students as having a particular set of characteristics (sections 2.2.1 and 7.3.1) that differed significantly from work-based learners' experiences of higher education (section 6.2.2). Commitment to an identity as articulated in identity theory, in this case to this particular identity of a 'traditional' student, is compromised. Participants presented a different narrative of being a mature student and experienced practitioner. Their student journey was characterised by time poverty and managing a set of competing familial as well as occupational responsibilities which created a range of challenges for them *being* a student. This range of contrasting characteristics to those of a 'traditional' student highlights the lack of 'shared meaning' associated with this role as described by identity theory in the articulation of roles.

The dissonance between the public narrative of 'a traditional student' and participants' own experience featured in the data in a number of other ways. All of the participants were over 31 when the research began and were categorised as mature work-based learners. Age was raised as an issue in relation to being a student and how this contributed to feelings of being an atypical student. This also contributed to the notion of universities as alien

environments with experiences of 'imposter syndrome' (Clance and Imes, 1978; Chapman, 2012-13) (section 2.4.1). Identity theory offers a way of understanding how social structures are important sources of identity:

*'the content of and the meanings derived from experiences are shaped by where the persons are located in the social structures of class, ethnicity, gender, age'* (Stryker, 2008:24)

Markers of 'non-traditional' students such as age have shaped participants experiences of being students and the meanings they associate with these. Some participants also expressed resentment at the use of terms to describe them as 'student' and 'trainee' which Crisp and Maidment (2009) suggest are perceived as derogatory. At the beginning of their degrees in particular, participants resisted the salience of their identities as 'students' in place of their 'worker' identity as their 'worker' identity remained highly valued and an identity to which they remained committed. Their commitment to their 'worker' identities was based upon the established relationships they had within their places of work, both affective and interactional (Stryker, 2008) (section 2.3.1.1). For some participants, it was also due to the relative lack of commitment they had to the wider learning community (Wenger et al, 2002) of a university, particularly early on in the degree. On a professional degree this was also affected by the value they placed on being a practitioner. Terms reflecting their student status that reinforced their practice experience, such as 'work-based learner', were preferred by participants as they gave recognition to 'operational competence', a valued attribute which participants found was undervalued by HEIs. This lack of recognition of their experiential understanding

impacted on the provision of learning opportunities that they found lacked authenticity which weakened commitment to new identities.

Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital (1991) also provides insights into identity and how higher education requires a process of adaptation (section 2.5.1). O'Donaghue argues that, '*we do not come neutrally to the education system* (2012:191) echoing the notion of structures as defined in identity theory. This approach is helpful in understanding why some participants made reference to their social and educational backgrounds to explain the challenges they experienced in becoming and being a student (section 4.2). Familial and educational past experiences were identified by some participants as a barrier to undertaking the social work degree impacting upon when they entered higher education and also impacting on the transition into higher education. Establishing social structures, and people's locations within them, as shaping experiences is useful in understanding participants' journey's into and through higher education. There were notable differences between two groups of participants (those with and those without previous degrees) (Figure 6) in their identification of social and educational backgrounds as significant factors in becoming a student. All of the participants who did identify social and educational backgrounds as significant did not have prior degrees. In contrast, none of the participants with prior degrees mentioned this as significant in their decision to undertake the degree nor in their experiences of higher education. This could suggest that students with degrees had acquired cultural capital aligned to higher education positioning them within social structures in ways

that did not present barriers to their participation in the same way as students without prior degrees.

Family contexts suggesting a lack of cultural capital aligned with higher education were also featured in the data of participants without degrees. Half of the participants without first degrees identified themselves as 'first in the family' higher education entrants. Of this sub group, all but one expressed anxiety about their ability to manage the transition into higher education and the educational requirements. Their prior educational experience appeared to be an indicator of risk for these participants. My findings echo those of Warmington that for participants who did not have experiences of a traditional higher education trajectory (section 2.2.1) returning to education for many meant '*returning to a site with past associations of marginalisation and truncated progress*' (2002:584). Some participants had undertaken other occupational qualifications which were used as a gauge of potential success in higher education and used to calculate risks (sections 4.2 and 5.2).

Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital (1991) is also helpful in this thesis in understanding the contrast between participant's childhood educational expectations and aspirations with those of their current position in higher education. Previous negative experiences of education continued to be significant and shape experiences including the formation of identities as learners. Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital can be bridged to structural symbolic interactionism and identity theory. Cultural capital could be perceived to locate the individuals within social structures with identity

theory identifying social structures as a source of identity. For participants in this study a feeling of alienation in higher education and experiences of 'imposter phenomenon' (Clance and Imes, 1978; Chapman, 2012-13) (section 2.7) was shared by 12 of the 14 participants without first degrees, although for none of the participants with prior degrees. For some, this was accompanied by a heightened sense of vulnerability and fear of exposure amongst colleagues as 'not being good enough'. Whilst striving to gain credibility as a 'qualified' practitioner, participants risked losing credibility by failure to achieve.

Lack of academic confidence was also expressed by a broader group of participants including eight of the ten participants with either prior degrees or recent educational experience who expressed anxieties about their ability to manage the academic requirements of the social work degree and/or failure to live up to their expectations based on prior achievements (section 5.2). Acquiring the academic skills required for higher education marked a transition for some work-based learners in this study. Furthermore, success in academic assessments appeared to signal a transition or 'turning point' (O'Shea, 2014:140) (section 5.2). Participants identified personal development and achievement as significant factors in undertaking the social work degree which provided further opportunities for disrupting existing negative learner identities. Participants without first degrees were more likely to refer to limited expectations and aspirations on leaving school. For these participants, the opportunity to go to university meant a re-evaluation of their capabilities and identity as a 'learner'. Higher education

was portrayed as a transformative experience with it acting as a context for identity construction.

Data in this study suggests that as participants developed a student identity and they became integrated into the academic environment feelings of difference to other students that had previously informed identity were less pervasive affected in part by their integration into the university as a 'learning community' (Lave and Wenger, 1991:29). This was both evident in the meanings participants attached to their relationships with other students which tended to be stronger when these were other work-based learners (section 5.5), and in the meanings attributed to learning environments (section 5.4). Affective commitment, as defined within identity theory is evident here. Stryker and Burke (2000) found that students entering higher education sought relationships that confirmed existing identities. For participants, 'learning communities' (Lave and Wenger, 1991:29) comprised of other work-based learners often reinforced existing and valued 'worker' identities making these identities within higher education more salient.

Entering higher education required a repositioning of identities in a number of ways as straddling a number of domains added to the complexity of the student experience. The conflict between identities of a 'student' and a 'worker' was evident within participants' work places in their substantive posts (section 6.2.1) and also when on placements within their organisation (section 5.3). Interactions with colleagues foregrounded participants' identities as 'workers' with the marginalisation of their student status meaning that some participants were often expected to return to their



'worker' role whilst on placement. This sometimes involved the prioritisation of workload over student requirements resulting in what participants perceived as unreasonable expectations in terms of workload and leading to resentment by participants. When interactions with colleagues that meant their 'student' and/or 'learner' identities were recognized, this was highly valued by participants. This was particularly so when recognition of their 'student' identity was accompanied by the resourcing of it including a reduced 'student caseload', opportunities for reflection and study time which participants felt reinforced their student identity and transition from 'a worker' to 'a student' in higher education. Identity theory proposes that identities are formed when people are assigned positions as social objects by others and then internalize that designation (Stryker, 2008). When others such as colleagues failed to assign a new position of 'student' to participants this impeded the development of a student identity despite participants' efforts to renegotiate these positions.

#### **7.3.1.2 Changing Identities: the Challenges and Opportunities as 'Workers'**

This section explores the impact of undertaking the social work degree on the occupational identities of participants. The data in this study indicated that the work-based learning route offered an opportunity for participants to disrupt their existing identity as an unqualified worker. The public narrative of a 'qualifications premium' (Watts and Waraker, 2008:106) is evident in shaping the decision of participants to undertake the social work degree (section 4.4). In response to research question one, *'what factors influence students' decisions to undertake the social work degree via work-based*

*learning routes?*' participants identified their desire to have a professional qualification because of benefits to their own careers.

The public narrative of a 'qualifications premium' responds to the drive for professionalisation in social work. Drawing on Simpsons work (2003), Watts and Waraker (2008) refer to the power and authority afforded professionals because of their qualified status. Social work organisations employ both qualified and unqualified staff to deliver services 'privileging' one group due to their qualified status. The 'privileges' that participants identified were remuneration along with the credibility and authority that accompanied a qualification. These 'privileges' served to reinforce the position designation assigned to them as 'unqualified' staff. Participants believed this system of privileges gave more value to a qualification, the relevance of which was not always directly evident, at the cost of devaluing their extensive experiential understanding and skills. For some participants, this created a dichotomy amongst practitioners that impacted upon their practitioner identities.

Participants described the dichotomy in their work places featuring 'the qualifieds' and 'the unqualifieds' (section 4.3.3), reinforcing the significance of position designations (Stryker and Burke, 2000; Stryker, 2008) and highlighting the relational and interactional features of identity that are key to identity theory (Stryker, 1987, 2008). Perceptions of their own identities in relation to others created both formal and informal divides in the workforce. Being positioned in the group of 'unqualifieds' was found by participants to be uncomfortable and undermining with seven of the 20 participants feeling

that they received a poorer level of pay for what they believed was work that was at least equal to the standards demonstrated by their qualified colleagues, reinforcing the concept of a false dichotomy between the two groups of staff. This emphasised the aspirational quality of the social work degree with the qualification offering participants the opportunity to change their 'unqualified' identity and create parity with their colleagues thereby attracting the more privileged status. For participants, a professional identity meant that they had the potential to progress in their organisation with access to roles and areas of practice from which they would otherwise have been excluded.

Since 2003 the social work profession has made attempts to enhance its professional status and standing (Moriarty et al 2008) with the creation of the social work degree as the required qualification taking the place of the DipSW (section 1.5). Whilst the professionalisation of social work gives recognition to the roles and responsibilities of social workers and is therefore to be welcomed, data in this thesis highlights the complex relationship between 'operational competence' and 'academic competence' (Watts and Waraker, 2008:108). Participants stated that they believed there was a lack of recognition of their 'operational competence' including their skills and experiential understanding gathered during their years of practice (between five and 27 years) and highly valued by participants. This lack of recognition was felt by participants to undermine their contribution as practitioners compared with that of qualified social workers and particularly in relation to newly qualified social workers or practitioners with a different qualification. This was also extended to professionals from outside their

agency when their practitioner identity (qualified or unqualified) appeared to correlate with the weighting that was attached to their contribution in practice discussions irrespective of their particular role in relation to the service user.

For some participants having a professional qualification was also perceived to be a public badge of credibility giving the participant licence to fully participate in professional discussions and confidence to challenge other professionals, seen by some as an integral part of their role. For others whilst their experience as unqualified practitioners was valued, their title or role meant a more lowly position in the office hierarchy with lack of status and recognition compounded by differential levels of remuneration. This reinforces the notion of position designation by others, as proposed in identity theory (Stryker, 1987, 2008). This fixed position is problematic given the organisational roles that unqualified practitioners often occupy and the practice wisdom that participants contribute to services. Undervaluing this can diminish the potential contributions to service delivery. Becoming qualified however, meant a migration across the divide from one group to another providing a sense of integration, inclusion and a more valued social identity that had previously been denied them.

As a protected title (under the Care Standards Act, 2000) 'Social Worker' can only be used by appropriately qualified professionals (section 1.5). For some of the participants this visible delineation also undermined their credibility with service users. It was felt that meeting service users' expectations of a good service was perceived to be associated with the

label of 'social worker' (section 4.3.3) a designated position rather than necessarily the quality of the service they provided. This was not felt by all participants some of whom stated that service users placed little weight or consequence on the title although they felt the need to defend their practice as unqualified practitioners.

The need or desire for occupational development was a key motivating factor for participants in this study echoing the public narrative of a 'qualifications premium'. However, findings from my study also suggest that personal motivations, such as disrupting existing learner and familial identities were sometimes more dominant in participant's narratives with 12 of the 20 of participants mentioning personal motivations as particularly significant in their decision to undertake the social work degree. The data in my study suggests that for women, higher education offered liberation from roles as well as the accompanying identities that participants found restrictive and limiting (section 6.3.2). Work-based learning routes offer access to a professional programme of qualification although the opportunities this presents for individuals are more far reaching.

#### **7.3.1.3 Gender: Roles and Identities of Work-based Learners**

Gender was highlighted as a factor in participants' experiences of higher education in relation to all three research questions. Gender was evident in the way participants talked of conflict between roles and their related identities that straddled both domestic and educational domains but not identified as a source of conflict in relation to occupational domains. The

data suggests that conflict arising from familial roles and *becoming* and *being* a student was a particularly consistent theme for women within the study supporting the findings of Warin and Dempster (2007) that gender is a key organising principle in higher education and with a 'higher order' of salience compared to other identities in a hierarchy of salience (Stryker and Burke, 2000). The structural approach to symbolic interactionism provides a theoretical approach that recognises demarcation criteria such as gender and the impact upon identity. Gender in relation to social work and social work education has been the subject of much literature (section 2.2.2.1) with social work traditionally being a gendered profession (Perry and Cree, 2003; Furness, 2007 and 2012; Moriarty and Murray, 2007; HCPC, 2016). The gender divide in this study is illustrative of this (section 3.4.2).

One of the issues that arose for both men and women was their identity as a mother or father. For those participants with young children (under the age of 10) being a mother was often identified as the salient identity, and data (section 4.3) suggested that this was a significant factor in deciding *if* they could undertake the social work degree due to what they perceived would be the competing demands of 'mother' and 'student'. Only women talked about having young children as a factor in deciding *if* and *when* to undertake the degree. The rationale put forward by some of the women was that they felt studying would impact negatively upon their children in terms of the time they would be able to dedicate to them and the potential financial hardships, and therefore their ability to be a 'good mother'. This suggests motherhood as a highly salient identity shaped by their affective commitment to this identity. Their role and responsibilities as a mother limited the options they felt they

had in pursuing their own interests and career aspirations. For two women who did not already have children the decision to undertake the social work degree effected when they chose to start a family due to a belief that for them these two roles were incompatible. This is not to say however, that children did not feature in the accounts of men. For one of the men and four of the women with children at home, having young children was a factor in deciding *how* to undertake the social work degree. They opted for a work-based learning route in the hope that it would provide greater flexibility regarding when to study and the ability to accommodate their studies around family life and thereby limit the impact studying would have on their commitment to their identity as a 'good mother'.

Time poverty was considered a particular risk when choosing whether or not to undertake the degree and was a consistent feature of women's experiences with the impact of this on their children featuring more consistently than in men's data. All of the women who had children foregrounded the needs of their children (both dependent and living independently). Furthermore, the experiences of all of the women with dependent children signalled tensions in their attempts to maintain a status quo at home, supporting the argument put forward by Watts and Waraker (2008) who suggested that students did not want to disrupt other roles. Beck states that women students lead a double life where '*the family rhythm*' (1992:132) continues alongside other conflicting domains with at times incompatible commitments. This study found that being a student created conflict and tension for some of the men and most of the women

straddling both educational and domestic domains although there were differences in the data from women and men as described.

This study found that for women family and domestic roles were not without tensions with a third of all the women identifying the limitations of family roles and their resulting identities. As their children became more independent, six of the women participants talked about wanting fulfilment in other ways and saw higher education as a way of providing this. This did not feature in the men's narratives suggesting that men were not seeking fulfilment in this way. Participation in higher education then appeared to have the potential for emancipatory outcomes. One third of the women participants in this study identified the social work degree as potentially liberating both in terms of the constraints of domestic responsibilities and as a way of challenging their existing learner identities and positions within social structures, exercising agency and choice. Osborne et al's category of 'personal grower' (2004) is useful here as a way of understanding how the work-based social work degree provided an opportunity for personal development as well as emancipation and thereby offered a personal as well as a professional transition.

In the men's data, the most common motivation to undertake the social work degree was based upon the desire for recognition of their practice and the contribution they made to their team and organisation. Whilst several of the women participants talked about the status associated with being a social worker, as well as being valued by their colleagues, recognition was not commonly mentioned (section 4.4). Academic confidence, and lack of it,



were also factors that featured in both the men's and women's experiences however, there were some gender differences between the men and women. Doubts about academic capabilities were more frequently expressed by women participants with the men signalling greater confidence in managing the academic requirements of the social work degree in general (section 4.2).

The impact of making the choice to undertake the degree, appeared to be accompanied by conflict, tension and/or guilt for many of the participants. This appeared in participants' narratives in a number of ways. Undertaking the social work degree resulted in conflict with established behaviours involving, for women, and the salience of their identities as mothers. For nearly half the women in this study this conflict was found to be overwhelming at times and was felt particularly keenly when participants had assignments to prepare for and submit. Women managed this conflict by separating their role as a student from their family life and concealing their studies from their children and families. The data suggests that this was for fear of appearing distracted from domestic and familial roles and relationships resulting in over half the women becoming 'hidden learners', echoing the findings of Lillis that women conceal their studies to avoid household tensions (2001). My study reveals how this strategy often resulted in feelings of isolation and compounding the feelings of guilt particularly for women participants.

The findings in relation to both women and men also revealed the impact that undertaking the degree had upon partners and children requiring a

renegotiation of relationships. For women, this also extended to wider social relationships with eight of the 15 women participants talking about how these relationships were neglected during their studies and required reparation when space was negotiated or their studies lapsed and time allowed. Whilst some of the men mentioned their role as partner, none talked about how friendships were effected through time poverty. Furthermore, only one man mentioned caring responsibilities whilst five women mentioned being active carers for family members with this additional role contributing to the competing demands to juggle.

For women, the role of house keeper also featured in their experiences of being a student. This role was compromised when participants were undertaking their studies including their inability to maintain their usual domestic standards. Housekeeping was presented in the data as a gendered responsibility and when this was jeopardised it was again accompanied by feelings of guilt (section 6.3.2). This echoes a public narrative of 'gendered family roles' where systems of power structures shape roles and the salience of identities. Whilst four of these six women negotiated small changes to domestic arrangements with other family members taking on additional responsibilities, two of these six stated that their efforts were less successful. The differences between women's and men's experiences of being work-based learners could be understood in terms identity theory's notion of salience and that gendered identities are more likely to shape choices for women than men.

By drawing on the structural approach to symbolic interactionism and the three public narratives of a 'qualifications premium', 'gendered family roles' and 'a traditional student' it is possible to understand how individuals attach meaning to their experiences through a medium of social structures which are shaped by power and privilege. Furthermore, the data highlights how public narratives as frames of reference also serve to both facilitate and impede both *becoming* and *being* students as work-based learners journey into and through higher education.

The next section examines the concept of transition as a form of 'identity change process' that Stryker used in identity theory. Transition provides a theoretical lens bridged to structural symbolic interactionism through which work-based learners' experiences of movement between multiple roles and subsequent changes in identities can be understood. In particular, I explore the relevance of Gale and Parker's three types of transition (2014).

### **7.3.2 Higher Education: Transitions for Work-based Learners**

Student transitions in higher education have been the focus of much academic literature (Ecclestone, 2007; Esmond, 2012; Gale and Parker, 2014; Martin et al, 2014; O'Shea, 2014) generating insights into student experience. Gale and Parker define transition as '*the capability to navigate change*' (2014:737) (section 2.5.2). Data in this study suggests that transitions are ways in which participants manage multiple roles which have an impact on shifting identities. Whilst transitions are experienced in

different ways by participants they have been central in characterising the student journey impacting upon identity in a variety of ways.

Participants identified challenges in managing multiple roles that occurred at various points in their educational journey but also identified opportunities in relation to existing and new identities signalling transitions. O'Shea suggests transitions are stimulated when conflict occurs between actual identities and aspired identities characterised by 'turning points' (2014:140). 'Turning points' can either enhance or impede opportunities and result in a re-evaluation of identity (section 2.3.3). To understand what this means for work-based learners in this study I have drawn in particular upon Gale and Parker's (2014) typology of student transition in higher education, based on an analysis of existing research. This typology both extends understanding of the different ways students may experience transition and is also linked to ways in which HEIs can respond. Gale and Parker's typology identifies three different conceptualisations of transition:

Type 1 – transition as *induction*

Type 2 – transition as *development*

Type 3 – transition as *becoming*

(Gale and Parker, 2014)

I consider each of Gale and Parker's types (2014) of transition in relation to the data in this study.

### **7.3.2.1 Transition as Induction**

Type 1 'transition as induction' presents transition as a sequence of adjustments over a period of time. Participants had identified a number of barriers in accessing the work-based learning degree highlighting the potential for transition at this stage. The transition into higher education was made less problematic for participants by the ability to maintain working roles and relationships within their organisations for longer, minimising disruption at least initially to existing identities that were valued by them. For the participants who were seconded, the transition into higher education also provided an opportunity of undertaking a degree alongside the security of employment within their agency. There was also evidence in this study that the particular design of the work-based routes aided the transition into university by offering opportunities to participants for greater control over the management of their studies in ways that accommodated other obligations and enable commitments to established identities to be maintained.

For participants from the national distance learning university it was the flexibility of the programme that appealed (section 3.4.1). Learning materials in this programme were provided in sequential blocks with a proposed timeline. This meant that participants were able to choose when to engage in learning as opposed to the emphasis being on fixed attendance at lectures, furnishing participants with choices about how to accommodate additional obligations amongst the competing demands of work, family and social relationships. On the local face-to-face university programme, it was the part-time attendance and greater flexibility in year

one that particularly appealed and facilitated the transition into higher education.

A sense of belonging to a group (section 5.5) and effective integration is linked to the retention of students in higher education and therefore strategies that encourage this are embedded in induction and programme design (Gale and Parker, 2014). The structure of the two programmes at the local face-to-face university and the national distance learning university (section 3.4.1) offered different experiences of higher education including how students were encouraged to integrate and develop a sense of belonging responding to research question two, '*how do students experience the educational journey?*' Participants at the face-to-face university formed strong and enduring learning communities (Wenger et al, 2002) at university (section 2.3.3). They were known by the 'traditional' route students, tutors and themselves as 'the work-based learners', a label that served to both unite them but also make them different from the other student groups. Progression from year one of the programme to year two, when the work-based learning route and traditional route combined, presented a second transition as a student. Lave and Wenger's concept of '*legitimate peripheral participation*' (1991:29) is useful here. Lave and Wenger use this concept to suggest that newcomers to communities of practice need to be fully integrated and participate in the 'sociocultural practices of the community' enabling the development of student identities (Lave and Wenger, 1991:29).

In contrast, for work-based learners at the national distance learning university most of the learning materials were delivered via distance learning with participation in on-line forums, a form of 'learning community' (Lave and Wenger, 1991:29). Engagement in online communities however, was more sporadic between participants leading to '*asynchronous learning*' (Martin et al, 2014:204) (section 2.3.3). Findings from this study suggest that there were fewer opportunities for participants from the national distance learning university to locate themselves within a student group and whilst valued, the opportunities to engage with other students were limited. This resulted in a more fragmented and fragile learning community (Lave and Wenger, 1991:29) for most participants to navigate than was apparent on the other programme. For three of the participants this led to feelings of isolation and detachment. That is not to say that participants did not form social identities with other students in 'bootlegged learning communities' (Wenger et al, 2002:28), meaning they were visible and open to only some members. This however, required more purposeful and proactive strategies including separate and discreet Facebook sites. When these were established these learning communities (Wenger et al, 2002) became vital sources of support during the educational journey and were highly valued by participants contributing to positive learning experiences. Due to the different public narrative of a 'traditional student' (section 7.3.1.1) this created further challenges for work-based learners.

'Communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger, 1991, 2003; Wenger, 1998) featured strongly in the majority of participants' accounts (17 of the 20), with a particular emphasis on the social nature of learning (Moriarty et al, 2009).

The data suggests that belonging to a group was a positive experience in terms of the education and social benefits with the data suggesting this facilitated the transition into higher education and the construction of a student identity. Whilst feeling different from students on traditional full time routes posed challenges for some participants these differences also served to create a collective identity based upon shared '*background, goals and challenges*' (Howard and Davies, 2013:780). Identity theory suggests that affective commitment means that the shared identity of 'work-based learners' becomes a salient identity within the university environment. For some participants in this study who experienced '*imposter phenomenon*' (Clance and Imes, 1978:241), this social identity served to legitimise their presence in a hitherto alien environment. Group membership such as this was central in facilitating the transition into higher education and constructing a social identity (Howard and Davies, 2013). Group membership was identified by half of the participants as the basis of a peer support network that enabled them to better manage the challenges of higher education. This affective support was described by six of the 20 participants as critical in their student journey resulting in the development of important friendships that enabled transitions and identity changes throughout their higher education journey (Baumeister and Leary, 1995, cited in Thomas, 2012).

For some of the participants on the face-to-face programme the initial divide of student groups between the work-based learning route and traditional route students was identified as significant when the groups had merged in year two (section 5.5). Once they had joined the traditional route



participants were still identified as 'work-based learners' to differentiate from the traditional route students reinforcing the concept of 'other' (Chapman, 2012-13, Esmond, 2012). Differences between the students included on the one hand the knowledge of the practice context of work-based learners and on the other hand the perceived academic skills and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1991) of younger 'traditional students'. Half of participants from the local face-to-face university were critical of the way the label of 'work-based learner' perpetuated their difference as students with suggestions that it created unhelpful expectations of them by other students as 'experts' and positioned them as providers of knowledge denying them the role of 'learner' creating a conflict of identities. One participant also recognised that this was a false dichotomy as some students on the traditional route were also experienced practitioners. Consequently, the focus on differences served to present further challenges for both the work-based learners and the traditional route students in facilitating the process of '*legitimate peripheral participation*' (Lave and Wenger, 1991:29) once the work-based learners had joined the students on the full-time traditional route.

Identity theory suggests that it is through interaction with others that identities are formed. Several studies have argued that this facilitates integration and engagement with location and context of study contributing to this (Simpson, 2003; Watts and Waraker, 2008; Chapman 2012-13; Thomas, 2012). The learning environment was specifically mentioned by participants as an important feature of their experience (section 5.4). On the programme at the local face-to-face university this meant an association

with a physical space including attending lectures, the library and spending time with other students which for some reinforced their student identity and integration into higher education. For participants from the national distance learning university their experiences featured more strongly accounts of isolation although this was often managed by use of forums and establishing 'bootlegged' learning communities (Wenger et al, 2002:28) which provided similar affective support. Chapman (2012-13) and Thomas (2012) also suggest that integration into the learning environment is related to the development of a successful student identity. Other studies have made a link between a viable identity as a student and success in university (Collier, 2000; Watts and Waraker, 2008; McSweeney, 2012). However, this study found that whilst this was the case for some participants it was not the case for all. Four of the participants on the national distance learning university degree welcomed the solitary nature of the study and saw this as a strength of the programme design. The rationale that was offered by them for this was that it enabled them to manage the demands of the programme unencumbered by other students, the relationships with whom could be distracting and yet another obligation that needed to be fulfilled. The isolation from other students and communication through on line forums also provided a cloak of anonymity (section 5.2) enabling participants to be novice students whilst they built confidence thereby minimising risks of exposure as 'imposters'.

### **7.3.2.2 Transition as Development**

The second type of transition identified by Gale and Parke (2014), '*transition as development*', is defined as maturation between life stages and identities

with movement between each being linear. The data reflecting this type of transition was more limited than for 'transition as induction' with participants not identifying many aspects of their higher education journey in terms of stages. When transition as development was signalled in participants' data, for most this was linked to either their development of academic skills or the journey from 'unqualified' to 'qualified' practitioner and the status afforded the latter. 'Maturation' in terms of their identity was in both instances associated with opportunities to extend and acquire the requisite knowledge and skills in the first instance those associated with being a student and in the second instance those associated with being a social work practitioner. Half of the participants felt when starting the degree that their prior practice experience had already equipped them sufficiently to undertake the role and that they were, in some cases, already performing at this level suggesting that they did not recognise an authentic development between stages from unqualified to qualified practitioner.

Data from this study also suggests that some participants perceived a need to adapt to an environment that was seen by some initially as remote and alien that created challenges as well as opportunities for participants (section 5.2). In this sense, the transition to higher education on a professional programme meant a process of successfully developing a set of academic skills as well as ways of *being*, such as skills of planning an assignment, academic writing and learning how to revise. Positive feedback on assignments helped to challenge the 'imposter phenomenon' (Clance and Imes, 1978:241) experienced by 12 of the participants. This suggests that identity transitions can be impacted upon by particular strategies of

HEIs that enable the development of work-based learners but that the needs of this group of students cannot be conflated with all new students.

Transition as development also means shifting from one identity to another in a staged, linear process. Participants in this study had all undertaken the social work degree in order to change from an unqualified practitioner to a qualified social worker. Eight of the 20 participants talked about the course contributing to their professional development. These participants made a distinction between different elements of practice stating that they were stronger in their skills base than knowledge base and it was the exposure to 'new' areas of knowledge that also helped strengthen the 'transition as development' by reinforcing a student identity as well as professional identity. Whilst the data suggests that participants had initially felt a 'qualifications premium' (Watts and Waraker, 2008:106) undermined their experiential understanding, the social work degree did enable them to identify the professional learning opportunities that extended their understanding of practice further. However, seven of the participants who were expecting that the social work degree was going to offer them an opportunity for development were disappointed on occasions. These participants felt that learning opportunities sometimes failed to differentiate between work-based learners and novice practitioners and therefore lacked authenticity for them.

By not taking into account their practice experience, some learning opportunities provided by programmes were very limited as opportunities to extend and develop knowledge, skills and values (the core elements of

social work practice) and instead reiterated what they already knew. A lack of authenticity of learning opportunities therefore mitigated against their development thereby minimising their identity as students and reinforcing their identity as practitioners with an existing knowledge base. It is perhaps the way that this type of transition is framed that makes it more relevant for social work students without practice experience where the journey from student to qualified social worker might be more evident. The more limited data relating to 'transition as development', compared to the other two types of transition identified by Gale and Parker (2015), is highlighted as an area identified for further research (section 7.7).

### **7.3.2.3 Transition as Becoming**

The third type of transition proposed by Gale and Parker (2014) is '*transition as becoming*'. This type of transition challenges the previous two types which Gale and Parker suggest, '*represent student transition into HE as (i) a particular time of crisis, (ii) part of a linear progression, and as (iii) universally experienced and normalised*' (2014:744). Instead, type three 'transition as becoming' recognises that transitions, rather than occurring at moments of crises, are actually daily events as people navigate between different identities in each context of their life. Gale and Parker argue that linear transitions illustrated by the traditional student route are not the reality for a lot of people (2014). Transition as becoming recognises the diversity of student lives and universities themselves. Student transition in this sense is not about '*isolated and stilted movements, from one context or identity to another*' (Gale and Parker, 2014:745) but rather should be understood as a series of movements and elements that can combine. As such this

approach to transition connects with key notions of structural symbolic interactionism including the reinforcement of identity through daily interactions and the multiplicity of identity.

Data in this study suggests that the identities of work-based learners were positioned within three domains (occupational, education and domestic) and transitions were embedded within their experience of higher education as daily events. Roles and corresponding identities require continuous negotiation and renegotiation as participants moved between domains. Creating a 'viable student identity' (McSweeney, 2012) alongside other domestic identities involved the negotiation of time and space at home and renegotiating domestic relationships that enabled participants to create an identity of a '*good student*' as well as maintain their commitment to an identity of a '*good parent*'. Far from being universally experienced these were dependent upon individual subjectivities. Transitions were not always about the successful integration of a new identity in its entirety. Some transitions were more fragmented and involved particular 'turning points' (O'Shea, 2014:140). These include positive feedback on academic work and adapting to a new learning environment which were not necessarily linear progressions.

Returning to the workplace as a student social worker created a further transition in a context of established routines and relationships and required students to renegotiate the expectations of others and of themselves in order to facilitate the transition of *becoming* a student. For five of the 17 participants who had been on placement outside of their agencies their

established identity as competent practitioner was disrupted due to interactions with others who associated the term 'student' with 'not knowing' thereby minimising their prior experience and potential to contribute. Being on placement away from their places of work was markedly different and included the opportunity to disengage from relationships that made salient their worker identities. This enabled participants to negotiate the space and resources to *become* a student and enhance the authenticity of learning opportunities available to them. For nearly half of participants who had already been on placement undertaking a placement had meant swapping a familiar practice context in which they felt competent, with an unfamiliar context in which they felt deskilled. This involved a transition from a confident practitioner to a 'student' with a less secure practice identity. Three of the participants however, embraced the transition to student. They found swapping identities from 'worker' to 'student' meant they were unencumbered by expectation with the transition relieving them of the responsibility placed upon them by others of being an expert in matters of practice. This however, was not the case when participants experienced the transition from student to newly qualified social workers when the security and protection of their student identity was removed and the increased expectations of others became a source of pressure. This echoes the structural symbolic interactionist approach to identity which states that roles are the product of shared understandings and are laden with expectations. The transition to the position of qualified practitioner in this sense can create a presumption of capability that is not shared by newly qualified social workers.

For all three types of transitions to be managed by individuals, Gale and Parker (2014) argue that universities need to prioritise the experiences of students to inform more flexible and inclusive provision that takes account of diversity and the complexities of students' lives, affirms subjectivities and values students' cultural capital. This study extends this point further with the data suggesting that the transition into higher education for work-based learners would be enhanced by social work programmes being designed in ways that facilitate navigation of domains and allow commitment to established identities to be maintained. This would mean not only positively valuing the student identities of work-based learners but their contribution to programmes as practitioners and create authentic learning opportunities that privilege experiential understanding. This would mean addressing the binary classification of 'unqualified' and 'qualified' practitioner.

Gale and Parker's typology of transitions (2014) has been helpful in distinguishing between the way participants experience transitions in order to accommodate multiple identities highlighting the particular areas of challenge and opportunity. The data suggests that transitions were not always a time of crises for participants but routine and can present positive opportunities that were empowering and at times emancipating.

#### **7.4 A WORK-BASED LEARNER'S HIGHER EDUCATION JOURNEY AND IDENTITY – A HEURISTIC**

In addition to contributing to the current literature through the data and findings generated by this study, this thesis offers a heuristic which is



outlined in Figure 14. This heuristic draws on the theory of structural symbolic interactionism and identity theory (section 2.3.1) combined with transition (section 2.3.3) to offer a theoretical framework for understanding the multi-faceted journey from unqualified to qualified practitioner via a work-based learning route in higher education. This theoretical framework presents a trajectory of the student journey that makes visible the multiplicity of identity and the potential for tensions and conflict in the context of transitions.

The aim of the heuristic is to encourage a more holistic appreciation of work-based learners' navigation through higher education by focusing on the multiple and interrelated domains occupied by participants namely educational, occupational and domestic. Wenger (2010) suggests that our identities are a reflection of the landscapes in which we live and that identity is a trajectory that reflects journeys within and across domains. This heuristic recognises higher education as a site of identity construction and a time of tension and conflict for work-based learners as well as opportunity.

By drawing on the concept of trajectory the heuristic has foregrounded the three stages of the student journey – pre-qualification, undertaking the degree and post qualification reflecting all three typologies of transition (section 2.3.3). Whilst a complex picture emerges of the student journey, the heuristic provides a concise framework to explore this and thereby enhance understanding. In relation to this study the focus is on the qualifying trajectory for social work students and is relevant to all

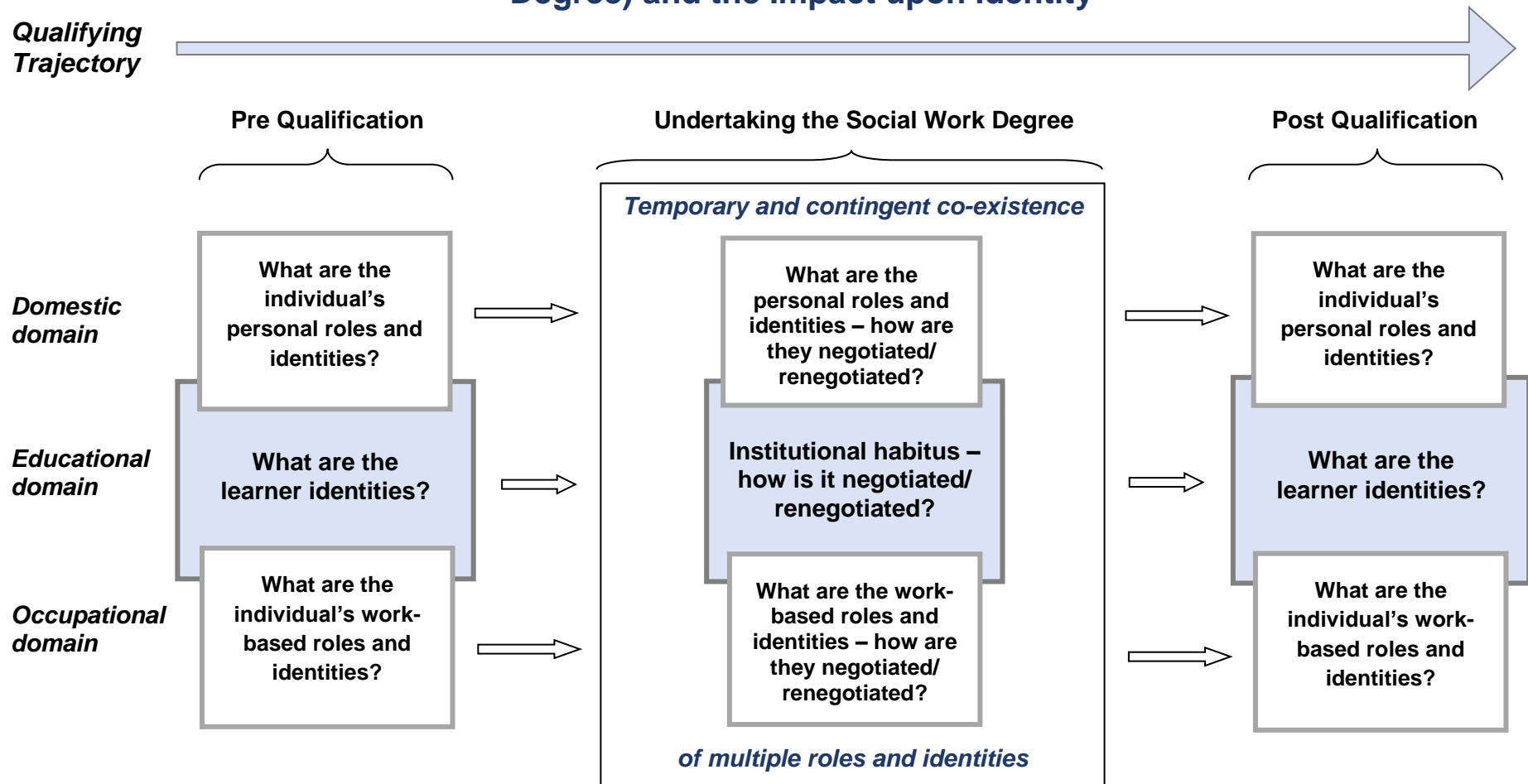
programmes including the new graduate schemes but the heuristic could also be transferred to other occupational qualifying programmes.

This study has helped illuminate key dimensions to work-based learning participation of which identity is key. Informed by a structural symbolic interactionist approach to identity and the concepts of salience and transition, this heuristic emphasises the contextual quality of identity by offering three separate but interconnected domains (educational, occupational and domestic). The three domains give recognition to the multiplicity of roles and accompanying identities with emphasis on their co-existence. Presenting the domains as separate entities in the heuristic also recognises the potential for immersion in each as well as the potential for conflict and tension at the boundaries providing '*interesting insights*' (Wenger, 2010:183) and opportunities for negotiation and renegotiation of identities. A structural symbolic interactionist perspective also affirms the structural influences on identity such as gender and social class and how this impacts on the experience of being a student, recognising agency as intrinsic to this.

The heuristic draws upon two models of trajectory (Gale and Parker, 2014) that were reflected in participants' narratives. The first model of trajectory is a traditional student trajectory bounded by time reflecting the structure of a degree programme with entry and exit points depicted by a horizontal axis showing the direction of movement. The second model is one which is not structured in the same linear, sequential way and reflects a more complex process reflected in the overlapping domains.

Figure 14:

## A Heuristic of a Work-based Learner's Higher Education Journey (on a Qualifying Social Work Degree) and the Impact upon Identity



The concept of a time bound trajectory for work-based learners limits the understanding of narrative and transition. Whilst in one sense there is a progression towards qualification and a moment when this occurs (when it is formally agreed that the requirements of the programme have been met in full), the first model of trajectory does not adequately represent the iterative and multi-dimensional nature of the work-based learner's journey. Instead a work-based learner trajectory is more helpfully understood as a '*perpetual series of fragmented movements*' (Gale and Parker, 2014:738) reflecting the complexity of negotiations, adjustments and transitions.

A plurality of domains can result in a fragmented identity with conflict and tension occurring between and across domains. By drawing on structural symbolic interactionism, the heuristic reflects that a person's identity is not coherent or unified but that multiple identities co-exist allowing for an identity to be salient at a given time and in a given context. This is reflected in the heuristic where the significance of time and context in relation to identity is indicated. In order to understand what this means for an individual it is necessary to understand the experiences of students holistically including their roles as well as their identities within educational, occupational and domestic domains and the interrelationships between these. The heuristic signals the potential within the period of 'undertaking the social work degree' for tensions and conflict between roles and identities to be reconciled and temporary and contingent co-existence of identities to occur. This is illustrated in the figure by boxing the domains together. The co-existence of identities can take place through processes of negotiation and renegotiation within and

between the domains with choices being made and one identity becoming salient. How students can achieve this and what or whom impedes or facilitates this is an area for exploration in relation to individual and collective journeys. Tensions and conflict between identities occur across the trajectory in the following ways:

**Pre-qualification:** For some participants in this study conflict occurred in this period due to established identities including 'learner' identities shaped by cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1991) that created barriers to participation in higher education (section 4.2). Access to higher education was also impeded for some women participants due to gendered family roles reinforced by public narratives (section 4.3). In addition, there was tension between the risks and opportunities of undertaking a social work degree including financial risks, time poverty and the opportunity for unqualified practitioners to become qualified practitioners (section 4.4).

**Undertaking the Social Work Degree:** This period is characterised in my findings by the negotiation and renegotiation of personal, educational and work-based roles and associated identities with salience contributing to the management of tensions between multiple identities and facilitating their co-existence. With established and valued identities based upon careers in social work organisations participants remained committed to their 'worker' identities after entering higher education (section 6.2.1). There was also dissonance between public narratives of 'a traditional student' and work-based learner identities that meant that becoming a student created additional challenges. Participants continually navigated tensions as an everyday occurrence as they attempted to reconcile the conflicting, competing and often

incompatible demands of multiple identities resulting in what Watts and Waraker describe as '*the emotional labour of bridging academic, personal and professional worlds*' (2008:110). Gender offers a lens through which we can gain further understanding of how some individuals experience some of these conflicts and tensions (section 6.3.2). However, these conflicts also present opportunities with higher education offering for some participants the anticipation of, as well as an actual, emancipatory experience.

**Post-Qualification:** The final period of post-university meant a further transition from student social worker to qualified social worker, a transition that has been the subject of policy changes including the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) for newly qualified social workers (Department of Education, 2015). In this study the data suggests that this was a period of tension and anticipation for participants with professional transitions mediated by support provided by employers and renegotiating relationships with colleagues. However, there were also personal transitions with the disruption of previously established identities. In this way university offers an opportunity to '*redefine a sense of self*' (O'Shea, 2014:154) and reposition oneself in terms of a public narrative of a 'qualifications premium' (section 7.3.1).

The value of the heuristic is relevant to variety of stakeholders. For aspirant and current students, the value is in being able to anticipate the challenges and opportunities that work-based learning in higher education can present prior to undertaking the programme, during the programme and after graduation in order to plan and negotiate accordingly. For tutors and employers, it can be used at a number of stages prior to the participant entering higher education as well as during their journey to support students in

planning for undertaking the degree and consideration of subjectivities and negotiation of tailored support strategies as well as authentic learning opportunities. For HEIs, employers and policy makers the heuristic provides an analytical tool that promotes understanding of an individual's journey and the potential for diversity. Rather than insisting that students adapt to institutional and organisational requirements, HEIs and employers can create provision that is inductive and informed by student experience. In this way higher education and social work programmes can become more accessible rather than potentially marginalise groups of learners and unqualified practitioners. This would more fittingly mirror the values of widening participation and social justice.

## **7.5 AN EVALUATION OF THE METHODOLOGY**

The discussion in chapter three highlights some of the challenges and opportunities of undertaking research that using this methodological approach can present. The following sections highlight particular areas that have impacted upon the study including the scope of the study, a large and complex data set, reflecting journeys, the methodological approach and finally my role in the study.

### **7.5.1 The Scope of this Study**

This study is a small scale study involving two work based learning routes on social work degrees at two different universities. The study included a total of 20 participants on the programmes who lived in the North East of England or

Cumbria. The scope of this study made it manageable in terms of the number of programmes to be accessed and the geographical distances that I needed to navigate to undertake the data collection. The scale of the study also meant that I had sufficient time to undertake all the focus groups and interviews within the limitations of a PhD study.

The regional scope of the study may be considered to limit the generalisability of the findings however, I have not sought to produce a study that is necessarily generalisable (section 3.3.1). Henn et al (2009) suggest that generalisability is not a standard against which the credibility of qualitative research should be judged. Instead I have aimed, through the use of narrative inquiry and methods of data collection in the form of focus groups and interviews, to provide 'thick descriptions' (Braun and Clarke, 2013:4) to reveal 'nuance and ambiguity' (Bathmaker, 2010:2) thereby reflecting the complex nature of human experience and create rich insights into the experiences of a number of individuals (Bathmaker and Harnett, 2010). This research approach has provided work-based learners the opportunity to share their lived and told experiences of becoming and being a student that can be shared with the stakeholders in social work education.

Expanding the scope of the study through the range of programmes from whom participants were drawn (both traditional and work-based routes, university or employer based), their geographical location and the number of participants may have potentially generated a broader data set. This would have enabled me to explore the differences as well as similarities of experiences across a wider range of participants and collection of programmes and examine what impact



regional and cultural diversity may have had on experiences and the significance of this. However, a larger group of participants spread over a broader geographical area would also have impacted on my time and perhaps limited the number of interviews I could have undertaken.

The research questions were purposefully broad, as were the focus group and interview questions, to allow participants to share experiences that they defined as significant rather than predetermine this with more specific questions. More explicit questions on programme design may have produced data that would allow a more comparative study of programme design and the impact this had on participant experiences. As it was, there was limited data that was produced that allow such comparisons to be made.

### **7.5.2 A Large and Complex Data Set**

The focus groups and interviews produced a considerable amount of data totalling over 350,000 words. Managing this large and complex data set required me to be scrupulous and rigorous in the management of the data. I established the processes for the analytical framework of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and applied these diligently in order to ensure my analysis was robust. I shared my findings with my supervisors at various stages as the basis for discussion enabling me to reflect on my own interpretation of the data and how to incorporate this within the thesis. Due to the large amount of data some of this has not been included. This was because some data was not relevant to the research questions and I also needed to apply a process of selection of data extracts to illustrate themes. I collated all data extracts that related to a particular theme and selected an extract for the thesis on the basis that it was a vivid and compelling illustration

of a particular point or points of analysis thereby throwing light on a larger phenomenon (section 3.6). I also provided contrasts where contradictions in the data appeared in order to illustrate the breadth of participants' experiences. I was very conscious that this would also mean that data was excluded and that some participants were more or less visible within this thesis which at times I found uncomfortable as it meant giving greater priority to the experiences of some participants instead of others. Participants were very generous with their time and sharing their experiences and I would have liked to have represented all perspectives and 'do justice' to all of their experiences however, this is neither within the scope nor the purpose of the study. I will be revisiting the data to produce subsequent articles and this may furnish me with the opportunity of representing more fully other participants' data. All of the participants are represented in some way in this study.

### **7.5.3 Reflecting Student Journeys**

This thesis aims to reflect the student journey into and through higher education. I have attempted to do this by including participants at various stages of the journey and then provide a representation of the various stages rather than provide a complete trajectory of individual students by following them through the course of the programme. As a part-time PhD student, the time span and time resourcing of this study was limited and longitudinal research such as this was beyond the scope of this study. A longitudinal approach would contribute to a more complete understanding of the transitions for each individual, what impacts upon these at various stages and create a more holistic picture from pre-qualifying to post-qualifying practice.

### **7.5.4 Methodological Approach**

Narrative inquiry is the overarching methodology underpinning this study informed by critical social research and feminist research. Narrative inquiry has orientated me to the methods of data collection as it provides an approach to research that foregrounds the voice of the participants and makes visible the meanings people attach to their experiences. Epistemologically this leads to interpretations both by the teller of the story, by the listener, by the writer and by the reader (Riessman, 1993). Interpretation inevitably is accompanied by risks and as I have argued (section 3.5.4) '*we can never be sure that we've got it right*' (Holland and Ramazanoglu, 1995:15). I have attempted to stay true to the transcripts and given participants opportunities at various stages to make comments on them and remove sections if they chose although I am conscious of how challenging this may have been for some participants due to perceived power imbalances (see section 3.9). Some however, did participate in these processes (section 3.7.5).

Spector-Mersel (2010) argues that the aim of social change by narrative researchers is currently a live debate. She suggests that whilst some researchers, influenced by their methodological approach, see change as the domain of policy makers and politicians, others utilising a different approach see narration as empowering in itself for participants and an opportunity to make the voices of marginalised groups heard (2010). By sharing the stories of the participants I aim to give recognition to the meaning of individual experience and consider how this can contribute to improved opportunities for aspirant social workers, students, employers, social work educators and the social work

profession as a whole. Accounts of marginalised groups are not, however, in themselves necessarily emancipatory and arguably may sometimes serve to reinforce the power relations and the social and ideological positions.

### **7.5.5 My Role**

Reflexivity has been a key feature of my approach to this study (section 3.9). As the researcher, I have endeavoured to use a collaborative research approach with participants at various stages adopting elements of a feminist methodological approach (Oakley, 1981; Stanley and Wise, 1993; Kelly et al 1995; Maynard, 1995). Throughout the study I was aware of the power dynamics of the participant/researcher relationship (section 3.8) and operated with values of inclusivity and partnership (HCPC, 2012) encouraging participants to share their perspectives of higher education. I was always aware that as a lecturer/tutor in both establishments I had pre-established relationships with most of the participants and that their responses and narratives may have been shaped by this relationship. Being an 'insider researcher' (Costley et al, 2011), part of the HE establishment, it could be argued that I was perceived to be immersed in the cultural capital of higher education (Bowl, 2008). This may have created a framework for participants to develop their accounts that valued qualifications and higher education, thereby influencing the way they presented these and their ability to challenge my presentation of data and findings. Ultimately as Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) argue the researcher and participants are not equal partners as in the end the researcher has control of certain aspects of the research process and in the case of this study I have had to submit this thesis as my own work.

I tried to minimise power differentials and thereby create a collaborative research space (Bowl, 2000) through strategies like sharing transcripts and copies of chapters although it is ultimately the choice of the participant if they engage with these stages of the research process. Only one participant requested a very minor amendment to any copies of the various drafts of research data sent to them with others commenting that my analysis and presentation of findings accurately reflected their experiences (section 3.8.5). I actively sought to apply a reflexive approach (Sankar and Gubrium, 1994; Maynard and Purvis, 1995; Frost, 2009) to the research process by making evident the research decisions I made. I was conscious throughout of my own identity and ideological position and the impact these will have on shaping the research process and interpretation of findings (section 3.9) providing evidence of the analytical processes (section 3.6). I have endeavoured to make clear my standpoint, the theoretical assumptions that underpin this study and the strategies utilised for the interpretation and analysis of the data making the research process transparent at each stage (section 3.6). However, I am aware that power imbalances remain in the research process and steps were taken to address these in the analysis of the data (section 3.9).

Despite the challenges of these relationships to the research process I believe that my relationship with the participants, some of which spanned their complete journey through their social work degree, had enabled them to share life stories that on occasions involved very sensitive and difficult experiences. This relationship however, did challenge me at times and required careful consideration of my role as a researcher. At times the boundaries between various roles of tutor, researcher/'guardian of the story' and fellow student,

were less distinct although I believe I maintained the appropriate professional and empathic approach at all times.

## **7.6 THE IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION**

The implications of this study for social work education are of particular relevance at this point in time. Social work education is currently undergoing major changes in England with new qualifying work-based programmes being more widely delivered (see section 1.5). The implications of this study are therefore particularly relevant at a time when work-based learning is experiencing a rejuvenation in social work education and is being positioned as more mainstream (Newby 2005; Nixon, et al 2006; Shaw et al, 2011).

My aim in undertaking this research has been to foreground the voices of students in order to generate new understandings of their experiences of higher education and the journey of work-based learners from unqualified to qualified practitioner. By doing this I hope to provide insight that will support the development of social work education provision. The implications of the findings and the value of the heuristic are considered here in terms of the key stakeholders in social work education - students, HEIs, service users, employers and policy makers.

### **7.6.1 For Students**

Students are presented with personal and professional choices as unqualified practitioners in the field of social care/social work when considering career

development. Options for graduates in particular are increasing with government funding supporting more recent innovations for social work education (section 1.5) presenting a mixed economy in social work qualifying programmes. I hope this study will enable students to make more informed choices about what different types of route may offer them as unqualified professionals. The findings would suggest that flexible routes that take into consideration the barriers to participation would enable students to manage the challenges. The findings also suggest that by building on the 'operational competence' of work-based learners would enhance the authenticity of learning experiences and facilitate the transition from 'worker' to 'student'. By making more visible the challenges and opportunities of work-based routes this study highlights the factors that may facilitate or impede their journey from unqualified to qualified practitioner. The heuristic will highlight the potential complexities of this journey across educational, occupational and domestic domains and how *becoming* and *being* a social work student can impact upon students in a holistic way. As such it may enable forward planning to overcome barriers and also enable students to develop strategies for managing the demands and maximising the opportunities, social, educational and occupational, of undertaking a social work degree. In the context of new work-based learning programmes the heuristic may enable students to make salient their identity as a student, thereby creating authenticity to their learning experiences as developing practitioners.

### **7.6.2 For Higher Education Institutions**

This thesis provides a focus on work-based learners at a time when the role of HEIs in social work education is under scrutiny. The current developments

mean that students can undertake professional programmes positioned within a broader range of organisations, including local authorities, creating a more competitive market place for social work education. This provides a climate ripe for evaluating and reviewing social work education and this study provides a contribution to this debate. Local authorities are becoming more central in the development and delivery of programmes which is a fundamental change in social work education requiring HEIs to renegotiate their relationships with stakeholders and with other HEIs in Teaching Partnerships (Berry-Lound et al, 2016). This may impact upon the collaborative relationships that HEIs have developed with their own stakeholders such as professional bodies (which have during the course of this thesis included the GSCC, the HCPC and The College of Social Work), social work agencies (statutory and third sector), students and service users in realigning the educational and practice domains and designing and delivering social work education in order to make programmes more responsive to individual, local and national needs.

The findings from this study have provided new understandings of a student journey and the broad ranging impact of this experience. In particular, this study contributes to the understanding of differences between work-based learners and other higher education students that can encourage HEIs to consider the broader range of student needs. Quinlan and O’Brodivich (1996) suggest that students need to be supported through the process of change that occurs in higher education. Furthermore, they argue:

*‘Educators need to appreciate that adult learners arrive from many diverse trails of prior experience, and they will emerge upon equally divergent paths ... supporting successful life-career transitions is as*



*relevant as, and central to the development of occupational skills and knowledge'* (Quinlan and O'Brodivich, 1996:175).

Higher education provision needs to respond to work-based learners without seeing their differences as problematic and as Gale and Parker suggest design a '*curriculum that reflects and affirms marginalised student histories and subjectivities*' (2014:738). Higher Education policy and university mission statements continue to commit to widening participation. Some work-based learning programmes, including the two in this study, offer a real opportunity for mature students and 'second chance' learners to undertake higher education and to broaden the pool from which the social work profession draws its workforce thereby reflecting local populations. However, programmes continue to circumscribe participation and engagement with institutional frameworks that reflect and perpetuate structural inequalities (O'Shea, 2014). If 'non-traditional' learners, and/or students who are bound by other commitments, are to be given realistic opportunities to participate in higher education and professional qualifying programmes with opportunities to access this at various points in their lives, work-based learning could move away from prescribed student trajectories. Borrowing from the work of Schlosserberg (1989) in their review of support during times of transition for adult learners Quinlan and O'Brodivich state:

*'Transition is a time of risk and restructuring, and the outcomes of a transition depend on the extent to which changing circumstances alter an individual's social roles, personal relationships, lifestyle routines, and assumptions about themselves and the world (Schlosserberg, 1989). Whether those alterations are positive or negative depends on*

*the resources available to the individuals for coping with change'*  
(1996:175).

This study highlights the need for universities to consider how they support work-based learners to access higher education, navigate transitions and negotiate/re negotiate multiple identities across a variety of domains. This would also include considering the design of programmes along the spectrum of distance learning to face-to-face provision to facilitate access and participation. By engaging with this re-evaluation of provision, HEIs could consider the challenges and opportunities for each approach, ensuring that provision is informed by what it means to students. With the emphasis in higher education being on 'work-readiness' (Daniels and Brooker, 2014:65) this thesis provides a return to what it means to be a student for work-based learners.

### **7.6.3 For Service Users**

Service users are key stakeholders in social work education and as such have a vested interest in the recruitment of students and the educating of social work practitioners and therefore the findings from this study. In the current climate of change the emphasis on partnerships in social work education appears to have moved away from those with service users and third sector service providers focusing more on partnerships between local authorities and HEIs (Berry-Lound et al, 2016). The diversity of social work education partnerships is an issue to be explored along with the position of service users within them. This thesis has highlighted issues of access to professional qualifying programmes and the diversity of recruits to social work education. I

would echo the concerns of Smith et al (2013) in the potential impact this has on the local knowledge of social work practitioners and how this may affect the relationships with service users.

#### **7.6.4 For Employers**

Employers are the fourth key stakeholder in provision for work-based learners considered here. For many programmes, employers and their representatives come from a range of social work providers including the statutory and third sector and can contribute to social work education in a variety of ways - the recruitment of students, programme delivery, assessment and governance. The current developments of Step Up, Front Line, Think Ahead, apprenticeships and Teaching Partnerships all put an emphasis on local authorities as employers within the statutory sector placing them in a position of much greater control in social work education provision. Whilst there is clearly a commitment by local authorities to work-based learning routes in their new format, it is unclear what the impact of these will be on traditional work-based learning routes. These initiatives may well go some way to meeting the workforce development needs that secondment onto traditional routes previously met. Whilst these new routes were not meant to be a replacement for traditional routes they may well impact upon the recruitment to traditional routes and the resourcing of these by universities.

The range of new programmes may also challenge long standing relationships between HEIs and employers that could, Shaw et al suggest, raise *'uncertainty about the roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder and has the potential to create areas of disputed territory'* (2011:126). The findings of

this study may therefore prove to be prescient and provide insights for employers into the complexity of experiences for work-based learners. In particular, the heuristic focuses attention on identity transitions between domains and which may otherwise become blurred and less distinct. The heuristic therefore can make more visible factors that contribute to the student journey and the strategies that support 'viable student identities' (McSweeney, 2012) to be developed enhancing the authentic learning opportunities for developing practitioners.

### **7.6.5 For Policy Makers**

Policy makers have generated a revival of work-based learning, evident in the funding of recent initiatives in social work education (section 1.5). Work-based learning in social work education traditionally had its roots in widening participation which has been a goal of government and higher education for several decades with policy initiatives mainly focused on widening access (section 2.2). However, the recent policy drive in social work education has been to recruit graduates to the profession, a departure in policy direction. Findings from this study suggest that traditional work-based learning routes are chosen by unqualified practitioners from a range of backgrounds who may or may not, lack the 'right' cultural capital for higher education (Beagan, 2007). Woodrow (1999) argues that under-representation of certain groups in higher education has been explained in terms of the shortcomings of the disadvantaged groups (cited in Bowl, 2001) whereas the challenges of participation may be better understood by examining how policies reinforce disadvantage by creating barriers. Current neoliberal policies that promote

the values of widening access and preserve the structures built on power relations need radical re-evaluation. However, Bowl and Hughes argue that:

*'the tension between promoting social justice through higher education and exposing it to the market forces has long been apparent in government policy'* (2013:7).

Instead policies that challenge *'the politics of social relations'* (Burke, 2012:4) may make higher education a site that is equally accessible to all. It is clear from this study that work-based learning remains a route into higher education that is more accessible for some groups than traditional full-time routes and for some is the only option, thereby ensuring that recruitment to the social work profession is from a more diverse population. The new graduate schemes, as a work-based learning option, have had limited evaluation as yet and therefore little is known about the longer-term impact on recruitment to the social work workforce as a whole. However, initial findings raise concerns about the entry requirements of graduate schemes limiting the scope of recruitment from local populations and diversity of student populations (Smith et al, 2013). Whilst initial findings identify some positive outcomes of the programmes (Smith et al, 2013) whether they will fulfil the aims of policy makers is yet to be fully understood.

## **7.7 SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

This thesis highlights a range of areas that warrant further research which are of particular relevance in the context of current developments in social work education.

### **7.7.1 Understanding the Development of Work-based Learners as Practitioners**

There has been little comparison between the current range of qualifying programmes in social work education. The focus of this study was to explore the perspectives of social work students undertaking an undergraduate social work degree via two work-based learning routes located within HEIs. This resulted in findings which include some pedagogical issues for work-based learners, but there was insufficient focus upon these by participants to inform a discussion about how existing programmes prepare students for practice in the field of social work, a subject of other studies (Jack and Donnellan, 2009; Bates et al, 2010; Moriarty et al, 2011; Carpenter et al, 2015). These gaps would suggest that a longitudinal study that followed individuals throughout their degree and ASYE would be of benefit given the current attention on the preparedness for practice of newly qualified social workers.

### **7.7.2 Work-based Learning in Social Work Education**

The profession of social work has undergone a number of changes since I began this study in 2009. At the time I began this study Front Line, Step Up and Think Ahead had not begun. Further changes to social work education provision are also being implemented and even more being planned, an indication of the rapidly changing landscape for social work and social work education (section 1.5). The introduction of new work-based qualifying programmes suggest that work-based learning is an option that both appeals

to the current government, employers and potential students and repositions work-based learning as more central to social work education provision. Most of the new schemes are seeking to recruit 'high achieving' graduates and therefore with prior experiences of higher education. Whilst this might recruit students with an academic track record it would also limit recruitment from some local populations. The future development of this post graduate provision and other similar initiatives will inevitably impact upon the need for, and therefore viability of, alternative programmes such as undergraduate degrees and those that offer access to 'non-traditional' students, programmes which contribute to widening participation in higher education. The reality of widening participation is an ongoing area for research but particularly significant in social work education at this current time.

With a focus on widening participation findings from this study have demonstrated that people may experience barriers in accessing traditional routes into higher education, and participating in a range of routes, for a variety of reasons and that cultural capital is a significant factor in this. The option of 'second chances' in this context provides opportunities for people to pursue aspirations both professional and personal. For some, work-based learning routes have been the only realistic option. With a focus on the standards of recruitment these routes provide an opportunity for the profession to attract social workers who already have practice experience and recruit people from diverse backgrounds who share:

*'some important common experiences with their future service users'*

(Jones, 2006:489).

The debate about the attributes and qualities that are most sought after in prospective social workers continues and narrowing the search to graduates may well impact upon this and is worthy of further research. The limited evaluation of graduate recruitments programmes already highlights the lack of diversity of recruits as an issue (Smith et al, 2013). Opportunities to generate new understandings about the variously structured programmes and how these each meet the needs of the full range of students and the social work profession should be welcomed.

### **7.7.3 Learning Communities**

This thesis highlights the differences in the ways students engage with learning communities with variations evident according to the structure of the programme. Work-based learners have a number of communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) to which they belong including occupational and educational communities. Further research could explore what student needs are met through various communities that contribute to their progress during their social work degree. Research could also explore whether integration into a learning community (Lave and Wenger, 1991:29) for work-based learners impacts upon their educational journey in the same or in different ways than it does for other higher education students.

### **7.7.4 Gender**

I have made visible in the findings a number of differences as well as similarities between men's and women's experiences (sections 5.3, 6.2.1 and 6.3.2). However, there is scope for further research to explore two areas in particular in relation to student journeys into and through higher education.



Firstly, there is scope to explore how gender impacts upon the choices aspirant students and students have, and subsequent decision making, in relation to work-based learners and social work education. Secondly there is scope to explore the salience of gender throughout the student trajectory. Further research into this area could examine how support strategies differentially impact upon men and women work-based learners on professional programmes.

### **7.7.5      Alternative Perspectives on Provision**

This study has been focused only on the student perspective of work-based learning routes. Whilst this provides very valuable insider insights and experiences of the consumers of social work education there is also scope for exploring work-based learning programmes from the education providers' and employers' perspectives particularly given the introduction of new qualifying programmes and the reconfiguration of partnership arrangements between HEIs and local authorities in particular. Individually and in combination, this type of research could develop understandings of expectations when they are shared and when differences may emerge enabling all stakeholders to make more informed decisions in meeting their responsibilities with the design, delivery and development of work-based learning programmes. In particular it would enable stakeholders to jointly design programmes that could be more individually tailored, extending the work of Holmes et al (2009) ensuring that students with varying social, familial and work-based commitments could manage the requirements of a professional programme.

## **7.8 CONCLUDING COMMENTS AND REFLECTIONS**

This chapter has considered the findings from this study linking them to various bodies of literature and identified how this study has contributed to the understanding of work-based learners' journeys into and through social work qualifying programmes. The findings from the data, responding to the three research questions, explore the challenges and opportunities of higher education and the impact upon identities. The proposed heuristic offers a framework for analysing these student experiences across axes of context and time. An evaluation of the methodology highlights some of the strengths of this study and also some elements that could have been done differently. This evaluation demonstrates a rigorous and transparent approach to the study strengthening the thesis.

This chapter outlines the contribution that this thesis makes to current ways of understanding the journey of work-based learners in higher education making visible how the experiences of individuals from a range of social and educational backgrounds are shaped by the policy context and programme provision and how these can be enhanced further. Furthermore, it considers the implications for a range of stakeholders in social work education in the current rapidly changing context of social work education. The chapter also considers areas for further research highlighted by this study.

My aim through this study has been to explore the journey of work-based learners from unqualified to qualified practitioners and consider how they navigated their journey into and through higher education with a view to

informing work-based learning provision in social work education. This study has achieved this and through conversations with participants I have generated 20 data sets illuminating participants' experiences and produced a range of findings in relation to the research questions. These findings contribute to our understanding of what *becoming* and *being* a student means to work-based learners on a social work qualifying programme and in particular the complex negotiations and renegotiations of roles and their related identities across multiple domains. It is my opinion that until higher education providers and policy makers have a holistic understanding of the journey that students undertake they will continue to marginalise groups of learners and limit opportunities.

The thesis has added to the extensive body of literature on becoming and being a student in higher education (section 2.4.1) by drawing on the sociological social psychological perspective of structural symbolic interactionism and identity theory in particular (section 2.3.1). Central to identity theory is the concept of salience. I have also bridged this overarching theoretical approach to the concept of transition to provide a broader approach that offers insights into the way work-based learners navigate identities. Through a narrative inquiry approach (section 3.3) the study has elicited the stories of 20 participants that have contributed to the current debates in social work education. The thesis has generated findings that make visible the complex and multifaceted nature of educational journeys across the trajectory from the decision to undertake the degree to graduation. The thesis contributes to understandings of the conflicts and tensions identified by participants arising from the multiplicity of identities spanning

educational, occupational and domestic domains and how transitions between these occur enabling the co-existence of these. The contribution to the body of literature spanning widening participation, work-based learning and identity reveals some of the factors that impede and facilitate the processes of *becoming* and *being* students on work-based learning in social work education.

Social work is based upon values of social justice, equality and empowerment, values that are also fundamental to widening participation in higher education (Jones, 2006). Work-based learning routes provide an example of how widening participation can be achieved offering unqualified practitioners an opportunity for both qualified status and access to higher education. Whilst work-based learning programmes in social work are increasingly focused on graduate entrants this study shows that some work-based learning programmes continue to offer a unique opportunity for some mature students who have experienced barriers to higher education. Social work education provision should be vigorously promoting these core values and have programmes that enable people with diverse subjectivities and backgrounds to participate and thereby enter the profession. It therefore remains vital that we continue to develop our understandings of 'non-traditional students' including those who are work-based learners and their experiences of social work education.

Undertaking this study has taken seven years during which I have been a part-time PhD student and a social work academic (as well as a mother, partner, daughter, friend). This academic work has contributed to my own

professional development and the way I practice the craft of lecturer and tutor. Furthermore, the process of completing a part-time PhD, such a substantial undertaking, has also inevitably resulted in personal reflections on my own identities. In my roles as learner and academic I have worked with a number of people including students, research participants, service users, employers, practitioners, researchers and academics who have contributed to my understanding of social work education and work-based learning. As an on-going member of these learning communities I remain committed to supporting students to access and participate in higher education.

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Faculty of Health & Social Care  
The Open University  
Walton Hall  
Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA  
Tel: 01908 858373

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Date

Address of participant

Dear

**Re: Research into work-based widening participation in social work education**

Ruth Hamilton is currently undertaking a PhD with The Open University and as her supervisor I am writing to invite you to participate in this. The title of this research is *Work-based learning routes in social work education: An exploration of student experiences*.

Ruth has worked as a lecturer in social work education in the North East of England for 12 years and has been involved in social work programmes that have widened participation in the social work profession by providing alternative educational routes to qualification. She would like to explore in greater detail student experiences of these programmes and the impact on their lives.

Should you agree to participate you will be invited to complete a questionnaire. This data will provide initial profile information about the cohorts of students undertaking work-based learning routes in social work education. Following the questionnaire a further sample of participants will be selected based upon how the data generated from the questionnaire responds to the research questions. This further sample will be asked to participate in either phase one of the study (the pilot study) or phase two of the study (the main study). Participation in both phases will involve attending a focus group (for approximately 1.5 hours) and one/two interviews (for approximately 1 hour). Further details of the research including the participants' involvement are attached in the Research Participant Information Sheet for your consideration. Your participation may help other potential students to make informed choices about the appropriate pathway for them. It will also inform employers and the providers of social work education in developing routes that better meet the needs of people wishing to qualify. Ruth would very much value your contribution and would like to thank you for your consideration of this proposal.

If you would like to participate **please e-mail to the above address by .....**

Yours sincerely

Dr Lucy Rai  
Senior Lecturer in Social Work  
The Open University

## CONSENT FORM

**Title of Study:** An exploration of student experiences of work-based widening participation routes and the impact of gender in social work education in the North East of England.

**Researcher:** Ruth Hamilton, The Open University  
[m.r.hamilton@open.ac.uk](mailto:m.r.hamilton@open.ac.uk)

	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
• I confirm that I have been given and have read and understood the information sheet (dated April 2010) for the above study and have received answers to any questions raised.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and that this will not affect my standing on the course.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• I understand that the researcher will hold all information and data collected securely and in confidence and that all efforts will be made to ensure that I cannot be identified as a participant in the study.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• I am happy for my comments to be tape-recorded.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• I give permission for the researcher, Ruth Hamilton, to hold relevant personal data (both audio recordings and paper copies of information, interviews and focus groups meetings). This data will be destroyed by the end of 2016.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
• I agree to take part in the above study and maintain confidentiality regarding other people's information.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Name of the participant:** ..... Date: .....

**Signature of the participant:** ..... Date: .....

**Signature of the researcher** ..... Date: .....

**Signature of the researcher** ..... Date: .....

### **RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET**

PhD Research Title: [An exploration of student experiences of work-based learning routes in social work education in the North East of England.](#)

#### **Aim of the Research**

My aim through this research is to enable the participants to share their experiences of work-based widening participation routes in social work education more widely. This will enable other students and employers to critically consider the contribution that widening participation routes actually have on the recruitment of people with social care practice experience into social work posts and identify some of the key issues that the research participants identify from their experience of these routes. The research will also consider how to support the progression and recruitment of people who may not have been able to access traditional routes into higher education. It may also provide an opportunity for social work education providers to consider in what ways they can widen participation in a meaningful way for non-traditional students in higher education.

#### **Why have you been asked to participate and what will you be asked to contribute?**

This research is focused on three routes into social work education in the North East of England, one of which participants will have been enrolled on. The data collection process involving the participants will begin with an initial pilot study involving interviews and focus group with a small number of students from one of the three identified routes. The main study will involve two semi structured interviews conducted between November 2011 and June 2012 with approximately 18 participants drawn from the same groups of students in Universities in the North East. All interviews will be conducted in a place agreed by the participant and audio recorded. Documented data establishing the policy, procedural and practice context will also be explored.

#### **Consent, Confidentiality and other Ethical Considerations**

Participants will be asked to sign a consent form prior to their participation in either the focus groups or interviews which will be filed in a secure place. They have a right to withdraw their consent up to 6 months following interview. If this occurs then all records relating to their contributions will be destroyed. If a student does not want to participate or withdraws at any stage of the study this will not affect their standing on the course in any way. Only initials will be used to identify the recordings of participants to help maintain confidentiality and their contributions will be anonymised when written up for publication purposes and wider dissemination and distribution. If there is a disclosure of information that causes or may cause harm to an individual or breaches University policy then confidentiality will necessarily be breached and the participant will be advised that the researcher will report the matter to the University and/or professional body. All contributions will be stored in a lockable cabinet in a secure place. The personal details of the participants will not be kept electronically in a transportable capacity but will be stored securely. Participation will be governed by ethical approval from both The Open University, Northumbria University, BERA Guidelines and EHRSC Best Practice Guidelines. Ethics approval has been granted by The Open University Human Participants and Materials Ethics Committee, The Open University Student Research Project Panel and Northumbria University's School of Health, Community and Education Studies Ethics Sub-committee.

All participants will be provided with the contact details of the researcher, one of the PhD supervisors and in the case of Northumbria University students a contact at that HEI (as third party contacts) in case they require additional information on points relating to their participation and other related ethical issues.

### **Dissemination of Findings**

It is intended that the findings of this research will be published in a variety of journals that are accessed by students, social work employers and social work education providers. Dissemination may also include presentation of papers at conferences and seminars and publication of the thesis. Copies of the findings will also be distributed to the two HEIs participating. The aim of dissemination is to enable all interested parties to be better informed about how widening participation routes can meet the needs of students. Participants will be provided with an accessible summary of the research conclusions and an opportunity to discuss these at a presentation of the research. Access to the PhD thesis once completed will also be available as will access to any published papers based upon the research.

### **The Researcher**

Ruth Hamilton is a former social worker and probation officer who has been a lecturer in social work education in the North East for 12 years. She currently works on both the social work degrees at the Northumbria University and The Open University. She has also worked as a researcher in health and social care and has an established professional interest in widening participation in higher education and social work. Ruth is registered with the General Social Care Council.

### **Contact Details**

If you are interested in participating in this research please contact:

Ruth Hamilton  
E-mail [m.r.hamilton@open.ac.uk](mailto:m.r.hamilton@open.ac.uk)  
Tel: 07714753327

If you have any concerns and wish to discuss this study with a third party please contact:

Dr Lucy Rai  
E-mail : [M.L.Rai@open.ac.uk](mailto:M.L.Rai@open.ac.uk)  
Tel: 01908 655841

*(For Northumbria University students only) Or*

Alison Carrick  
E-mail: [alison.carrick@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:alison.carrick@northumbria.ac.uk)  
Tel: 0191 2156218

June 2011



## ***SUPERVISION ARRANGEMENTS***

I receive supervision for my PhD research from two supervisors,

- Dr Lucy Rai, Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Health and Social Care, The Open University
- Dr Theresa Lillis, Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Education and Language Studies, The Open University

Supervision occurs on a two-monthly basis for approximately two hours. Prior to the supervision session I submit a paper to my supervisors focused on the work I have undertaken. The focus of this has been agreed at the previous supervision session.

In line with The Open University PhD procedures, I submit four progress reports each year to the Faculty along with a report from my supervisors. This is then ratified by Lindsay O'Dell, Director of Post Graduate Studies, Faculty of Health and Social Care.

**PARTICIPATION TABLE (individual participation trajectory)**

Programme	Year/ graduate	Participant (invitation round – 1, 2, 3, 4)	Consent Form	Participant Information Questionnaire	Pilot 16 June	Focus Group 1 20 June	Focus group 2 17 July	Interview 1	Interview 2	Social Class Questionnaire
National Distance Learning University	1	Sally (4)	✓	✓	Not part of study at this stage			25.3.13	20.8.13	
	2	Cerri	✓	Withdrawn due to pressures of work						
	2	Carl (1)	✓	✓		✓		15.12.12	9.7.13	✓
	2	Anna (2)	✓				✓	2.10.12	2.7.13	✓
	3	Petra (1)	✓	✓	Elected not to participate in focus group			19.12.12	2 failed attempts	
	3	Mary (1)	✓	✓	✓			19.10.12	13.8.13	✓
	3	Lois (1)	✓	✓	✓			9.10.12	19.9.13	✓
	3	Valerie (1)	✓	✓	✓			19.10.12	13.8.13	✓
	3	Rebecca (1)	✓	✓		✓		25.3.13	9.7.13	
	3	Laura (1)	✓	✓	✓			9.10.12	19.9.13	
	3	Donny (1)	✓	✓			✓	20.12.12	9.7.13	✓
	G	Hannah (1)	✓	✓			✓	22.10.12	No response to invitations	
G	Ivor (3)	✓	✓			✓	14.11.12	2.7.13	✓	

Programme	Year/ graduate	Participant (invitation round – 1, 2, 3, 4)	Consent Form	Participant Information Questionnaire	Pilot 16 June	Focus Group 1 20 June	Focus group 2 17 July	Interview 1	Interview 2	Social Class Questionnaire	
Local University	1	Keith (1)	✓	✓			✓	17.10.12	9.7.13	✓	
	1	Diane (1)	✓	✓		✓		17.10.12	11.7.13		
	1	Sarah (1)	✓	✓	Elected not to participate in further stages of data collection						
	1	Harriet (1)	✓	✓	No further contact following questionnaire						
	2	Brian (1)	✓	✓			✓	31.1.12	21.8.13		
	2	Sonia (1)	✓	✓		✓		19.12.12	2 failed invitations		
	2	Morag (1)	✓	✓		✓		19.12.12	11.7.13		
	3	Sam (1)	✓	✓			✓ x	No response to invitations			
	3	Hilary (1)	✓	✓		✓		1.10.12	No response to invitations		
	G	Holly (1)	✓	✓		✓ x	✓	22.10.12	No response to invitations	✓	
	G	Emma (1)	✓	✓	No further contact following questionnaire						
	G	Lillian (1)	✓	✓	Elected not to participate in focus group			20.12.12	18.8.13	✓	

**Key:**

Bracketed number indicates invitation round that participant joined if had not accepted initial invitation

✓ x = agreed to attend but then gave apologies

## PARTICIPANT INFORMATION QUESTIONNAIRE

**Title of Study:** *Work-based learning routes in social work education: An exploration of student experiences*

**Please read the Research Participant Information Sheet for further information on this research**

1. Name: .....

Address: .....

..... Postcode: .....

2. Gender: female ☐ male ☐ (please tick as appropriate)

3. Which programme of study are/were you studying on? (Please tick as appropriate)

The Open University BA (Hons) Social Work

☐

BSc (Hons) Social Work, Northumbria University

☐

4. Age: .....

5. What is your current job title?: .....

6. What is the name of your employer? .....

7. Years of social care work experience in total: .... (please state approximate years)

8. Other previous job roles: .....

.....

.....

9. What is your current highest academic qualification and the year it was awarded?

.....

10. What factors impact/impacted on your ability to undertake the social work programme (including other personal roles and responsibilities)?

.....

.....

11. If you were previously working in a relevant role what type of support did you receive from your employer to participate in the programme? *(please tick which of these is appropriate)*

	Yes	No
Financial	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Time off	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Finding a placement/mentor	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Agreement to use place of work for study purposes	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other <i>(please specify)</i>		

.....

.....

1 Please indicate *(by ticking the relevant box)* whether you would be willing to participate in a focus group and/or interview (dates to be confirmed).

	Yes	No
Focus group (approximately 1.5 hours)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Interviews (2 x 1 hour approximately)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Thank you for completing this questionnaire.**

*Please return this to:* Ruth Hamilton, The Open University, **Baltic Business Quarter, Abbots Hill, Gateshead, NE8 3DF** by .....

## SOCIAL CLASS QUESTIONNAIRE

	Yes	No
1. Prior to you attending university had anyone in your family (including parents and siblings) attended a higher education programme?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

2. Did they obtain a qualification?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
-------------------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------

3. Do you think that social class has been/is relevant to your journey into Higher education? If yes, how?

.....

.....

.....

4. How would you describe your own social class background?

.....

.....

.....

	Yes	No
5. Do you think that doing a degree changes people's social class or sense of social class?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

If yes, how has starting/doing a degree changed your social class or sense of social class?

.....

.....

.....

Any other comments

.....

.....

Thank you very much for your further contribution. It is much appreciated as always.

Regards

Ruth Hamilton

## **FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS**

The focus group questions were:

1. What influenced you to pursue a social work qualification?
2. What personal and/or social challenges, if any, you faced in undertaking the course?
3. What personal, professional and/or social opportunities, if any, did you experience in undertaking the course?
4. What was your experience of the education journey?

## **SECOND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

The second interview questions were:

- How would you describe your identity/identities prior to starting the course?
- How did this change if at all when you began the course?
- Did anything or anyone inhibit your ability to be a student social worker initially and/or later and if so what or whom?
- Did anything or anyone enhance your ability to be a student social worker initially and/or later and if so what or whom?
- What were your experiences of managing your identity at the same time (I named the ones that the participant had previously identified)?
- Has your participation in the social work programme impacted upon how you see your identity now and if so how?



## PARTICIPANT PROFILES

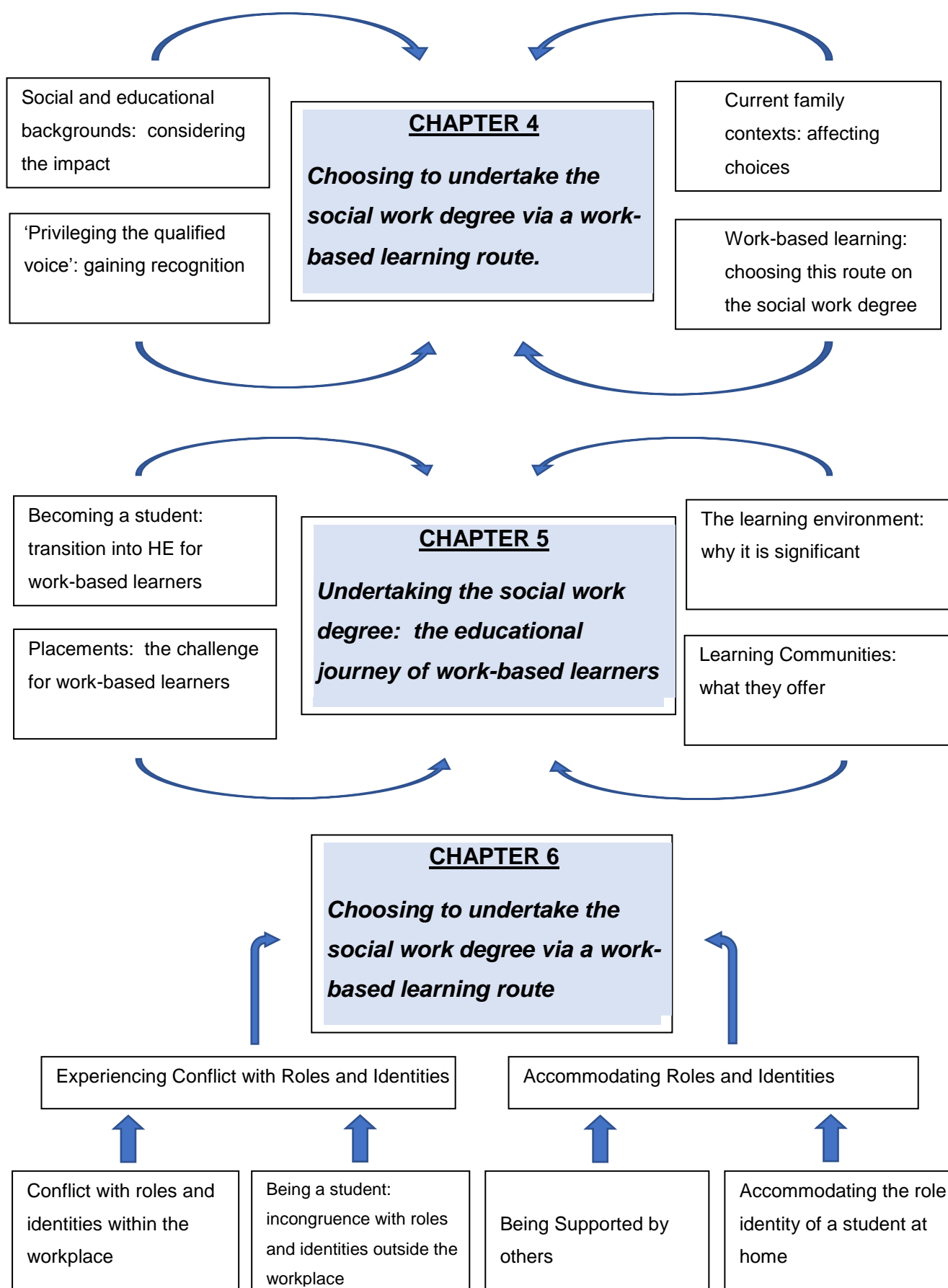
<i>HEI</i>	<i>Year at start of research</i>	<i>Participant</i>	<i>Profile</i>
<b>National Distance Learning University</b>	1	<b>1. Sally</b> Questionnaire, 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> interviews	Aged 47 when her participation in the research began and was in first year when first interview was undertaken. Sally was seconded by a voluntary organisation with 12 years social care experience. As a late addition to research she did not participate in a focus group.
	2	<b>2. Carl</b> Questionnaire, FG, 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> interviews	Aged 34 when his participation in the research began. He was completing year two modules when he participated in the focus group and first interview and undertaking his level 3 practice module for second interview. He was initially self funding with 18 years experience and later seconded by a local authority. Carl had a previous degree.
	2	<b>3. Anna</b> FG, 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> interviews	Age not known when her participation in the research began. She was completing level two modules when she participated in the focus group and first interview and a level three module for the second interview. Anna was seconded by a Local Authority.
	G	<b>4. Petra</b> Questionnaire, 1 <sup>st</sup> interview	Aged 32 when her participation in the research began and had just completed the social work programme when she was interviewed. Petra was seconded by her employer, a charitable organisation, from a managerial post with 10 years social care experience.
	3	<b>5. Mary</b> Questionnaire, Pilot Study, 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> interviews	Aged 46 when her participation in the research began and in her final year when she participated in the pilot study and first interview and was qualified for the second interview. Mary was seconded by a Local Authority from a managerial post with 18 years social care experience.

<b>National Distance Learning University</b>	3	<b>6. Lois</b> Questionnaire, Pilot Study, 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> interviews	Aged 50 when her participation in the research began and in her final year when she participated in the pilot study and first interview and was qualified for the second interview. Lois was seconded by a Local Authority with 9 years experience.
	3	<b>7. Valerie</b> Questionnaire, FG, 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> interviews	Aged 34 when her participation in the research began. She was in her final year when she participated in the pilot study and first interview and was qualified for the second interview. She was seconded by a Local Authority from a managerial post and had 12 years experience in social care. Valerie had a previous degree.
	3	<b>8. Rebecca</b> Questionnaire, FG, 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> interviews	Aged 38 and in the final year of the programme when her participation in the research began in a focus group and had graduated at the time of the first interview and second interview. She was seconded by a Local Authority with 8 years experience and had a previous degree.
	3	<b>9. Laura</b> Questionnaire, Pilot Study, 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> interviews	Aged 35 when her participation in the research began and in her final year when she participated in the pilot study and first interview, and qualified for the second interview. She was seconded from Year 2 by a voluntary organisation with 5 years experience of social care.
	3	<b>10. Donny</b> Questionnaire, FG, 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> interviews	Aged 34 when his participation in the research began and in his final year when he participated in the focus group and first interview and was qualified for the second interview. He was seconded by a Local Authority with 5 years experience in social care.
	G	<b>11. Hannah</b> Questionnaire FG, 1 <sup>st</sup> interview	Aged 31 when her participation in the research began and qualified and in a social work post when she participated in the research. She was seconded by a Local Authority with 5 years experience. Hannah had a previous degree.

	G	<b>12. Ivor</b> Questionnaire, FG, 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> interviews	Aged 54 when his participation in the research began. He was qualified when he participated and had been seconded by a private organisation with 22 years experience. He had a previous degree.
Local University	1	<b>13. Keith</b> Questionnaire, FG, 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> interviews	Aged 37 when his participation in the research began and had just completed year one when he participated in the focus group, and was in year two for the first and second interviews. Keith was seconded by a Local Authority with 12 years experience.
	1	<b>14. Diane</b> Questionnaire, FG, 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> interviews	Aged 45 when her participation in the research began and in year one for the focus group and year two for the first and second interviews. Diane was seconded from a Local Authority with 12 years experience in social care.
	2	<b>15. Brian</b> Questionnaire, FG, 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> interviews	Aged 47 when his participation in the research began and in year two for the focus group and year three for the first interview and had just qualified for the second interview. He was seconded by a Local Authority with 11 years experience.
	2	<b>16. Sonia</b> Questionnaire, FG, 1 <sup>st</sup> interview	Aged 46 when her participation in the research began and in year two for the focus group and year three for the interview. Sonia was seconded by a Local Authority from a managerial post and had 27 years in social care.
	2	<b>17. Morag</b> Questionnaire, FG, 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> interviews	Aged 41 when her participation in the research began and in year two for the focus group, had just entered year three for the first interview and had just completed the degree for the second interview. She was seconded by a Local Authority and had 25 years experience.
	3	<b>18. Hilary</b>	Aged 37 when her participation in the research began. She was at the end of year 3 of the programme when she

<b>Local University</b>		Questionnaire, FG, 1 <sup>st</sup> interview	participated in the focus group and had been appointed to a social work post. Hilary was self funding but supported by Northumberland County Council with 13 years experience in social care.
	G	<b>19. Holly</b> Questionnaire, FG, 1 <sup>st</sup> interview	Aged 32 when her participation in research began and qualified when she participated in the focus group and interview. She was seconded by a Local Authority with 7 years experience. She had a previous degree.
	G	<b>20. Lillian</b> Questionnaire, 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> interviews	Aged 50 and qualified when she was interviewed for the first time. She was seconded by a Local Authority with 9 years experience in social care.

**THEMATIC MAP: THEMES IDENTIFIED IN THE THESIS FOLLOWING THE APPLICATION OF BRAUN AND CLARKE'S METHOD OF THEMATIC ANALYSIS (2006)**



## **EXTRACT FROM FIELD NOTES**

### **Pilot Study: 16 June 2012**

Present: Valerie, Laura, Mary, Lois

Format: Focus group

Venue: National distance learning university venue

Time: 1.30-2.45

### ***Summary comments on focus group***

The focus group followed a tutorial that included the four participants. They sat around table chatting prior to starting the discussion, looking relaxed with one another and all contributing to conversation.

Spent some time explaining the purpose of the research and revisiting the participant information sheet, consent form and ground rules. All participants appeared happy with these parts of the research process - no queries raised. Some questions over research process including how long it would take.

Participants quickly got into discussion following initial question. Focus group conducted as more of a conversation between participants than me as the researcher directing the discussion. Some shared reflection on how they had worked together and supported one another. Participants supportive of

one another when emotions expressed (Lois and Mary) – affective support evident between participants, importance of group.

### ***Feedforward for Main Study***

1.Their prior relationships between participants and knowledge of one another facilitated the flow of conversation. Consider the impact of relationships between participants in next focus groups.

2. Initial questions from me appeared to instigate responses appropriate to the research questions. Some additional questions also required to probe particular responses further and to refocus discussion so remains relevant to research questions – try to limit length of question.

3.Discussion moved on issues they had regarding consistency amongst tutors that were not relevant to the research. My roles as tutor and researcher became temporarily blurred. I acknowledged their concerns but tried to redirect discussion onto research questions. Need to consider how I reinforce role as researcher in data collection process.

4.Identity emerging as particular theme:

- Identity as a learner prior to social work degree
- Identity as mother – challenges to this by being a student
- Higher education as opportunity to change identity